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Multiculturalism through the Lens: A Guide to Ethnic and Migrant Anxieties in Singapore

by

Catherine Gomes

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Preface

In 2009 I enthusiastically submitted a grant application to a funding body for a project on Singaporeans living in Australia. One of the reviewers dismissed the project questioning why I was insisting on pursuing a topic that was quite uninteresting since Singapore is nothing more than ‘a government project’. Whilst the Singapore economy is no doubt the result of steadfast government planning and execution, I would like to think that Singaporeans – myself included – are more than just the result of an elaborate scheme orchestrated by an omnipresent government. Sure, the government may be a fixture in the everyday life of Singapore citizens and the prime mover in creating a largely patriotic and nationalist society, Singaporeans have not altogether responded positively to governmental presence and dominance. Being a diasporic Singaporean living in Australia, I started to wonder how I could explore Singapore to (re)discover the place, its people and its culture. Likewise, being outside of Singapore forced me to rethink the lens I was going to use to disprove that my homeland, the society I came from and the culture I grew up in, were merely a government venture but something more remarkably fascinating. The use of screen – or more specifically, film – was a clear avenue for me in the pursuit of my quest. After all, my doctoral research was on Chinese cinema and I really do like Singapore-made films.

As I wrote, it became clear to me that this was not a typical project that fits neatly into the traditional Film Studies or Cinema Studies nexus. Rather, this project makes use of some locally made yet significant Singapore films by critically acclaimed film-makers to provide insights into Singapore. While I may not engage in long film analyses, I make use of the films as a window of opportunity to learn and discuss about Singapore society and culture. This project thus blends various interrelated disciplines such as Cultural Studies, Media Studies and Sociology, together with Film and Cinema Studies to aid this investigation.

This project is a journey into my own Singaporean identity. I have always been fascinated by ethnicity primarily because I never fitted into any of the recognizable Singaporean ethnic groups (Chinese, Malay and Indian). People I encountered in Singapore often questioned my ethnicity and wondered aloud ‘what’ I was. The dissonance that my ethnicity caused prompted me to write Chapter 2 which deals with the discomfort of ethnic ambiguity. Being a diasporic Singaporean means that I keep in touch with the homeland through discussions with students from Singapore whom I meet, through social media chats with Singaporean friends and through a daily digest of Singapore news available online. Over time, the recurrent theme I discovered is the aversion to new migrants entering Singapore. The second part of this book is dedicated to analyzing why this is and how Singaporeans are coping with what they clearly view as a threat to the fabric of their society.

Singapore society is complex and this book only scratches the surface of this fascinating place. After all, this is a young country which has developed into a first world globalized nation within decades and a young society which is coping with the changes that come with globalization. This book thus attempts to unravel the way Singapore society is dealing with the challenges it faces on a daily basis. At the same time, this project is also a tribute to locally made Singapore films. It is an acknowledgement of how screen has become embedded in Singapore society and culture that it manages to successfully provide a parallel dimension of the everyday familiar in a subtle yet honest manner.

I would like to thank Kirpal Singh and the Wee Kim Wee Centre at the Singapore Management University for their enthusiasm in publishing this material and for warmly

hosting me as a visiting academic while I did related research. This book would not have been possible if not for the six-months of research leave that was generously provided by the School of Media and Communication, RMIT University. I would particularly like to thank Stephanie Donald and Jo Tacchi for believing in this project. I also would like to thank Drew Roberts, Marsha Berry, Delphine McFarlane and Olivia Guntarik for helping me make improvements on the text itself by providing much needed guidance on communicating my ideas. I would also like to thank filmmaker Tan Pin Pin for taking the time to read the chapter dedicated to her cinema, for her comments and for her encouragement. Finally I would like to thank Andrew Newlands for patiently reading this manuscript and for putting up with all the idiosyncrasies I displayed while in the throes of writing. This, my first book, is for you.

Parts of this book have appeared in other publications. Earlier versions of Chapter 5 and 'The Everyman' section in Chapter 2 have been published as Gomes, C. (2011), 'Maid-In-Singapore: Representing and Consuming Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore', *Asian Ethnicity*, 12: 2, pp. 141-54 and as Gomes, C. (2012), 'The Everyman Hero: Cinema and Identity in Singapore', *Asian Currents*, June, <<http://asaa.asn.au/publications/ac/2011/asian-currents-11-06.pdf>>, respectively. Some parts of this book are extensions of work I have done previously in Gomes, C. (2010), 'Active Remembering in Utopia', in O. Guntarik (ed.), *Narratives of Community: Museums and Ethnicity*, Edinburgh: MuseumsEtc., pp. 290-316, Gomes, C. (2009), 'Keeping Memories Alive: Maintaining Singapore Nationalism Abroad', *Asia Journal of Global Studies*, 3:1, pp. 37-50 and Gomes, C. (2013), 'Xenophobia Online: Unmasking Singaporean Attitudes Towards 'Foreign Talent' Migrants', *Asian Ethnicities*, first published online on 8 April, <<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/14631369.2013.784511#.UmSDVfmnolQ>>.

Chinese names of persons in this book are written as family name followed by given name. For example in the name Tan Pin Pin, 'Tan' is the family name while 'Pin Pin' is the given name.

Introduction

*In a heartbeat, we will always be
Together, united; you and me*
'In a Heartbeat' (Ratonel 2011)

*One people, one nation, one Singapore
That's the way that we will be for evermore
Every creed and every race, has its role and has its place
One people, one nation, one Singapore*
'One People, One Nation, One Singapore' (Monteiro 1990)

While I was working in a government department in my homeland of Singapore, a colleague once asked me if ethnicity mattered in my choice of a life partner. To her surprise, I answered that ethnicity was not an issue. She then blurted out: 'You mean you like Chinese guys?' I am not ethnic Chinese. On another occasion, a friend once commented that she felt uncomfortable whenever she saw a biracial couple as the sight of a fair person with a dark person was too challenging for her to comprehend. My ethnic heritage has layers of multiracial couplings. Whenever I opened the employment section of the local newspaper, I encountered numerous non-government job advertisements listing 'able to speak Mandarin' as one of the essential qualities required. *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) and not Mandarin is my second language. It is perhaps fair to say that ethnicity dominated a lot of my everyday experiences growing up and living in Singapore.

I am Singaporean born and bred, having spent all my childhood and some part of my early adult years living in the country of my birth. However, I have always felt a sense of dissonance in Singapore particularly with regard to ethnicity.¹ While Singapore prides itself as a multicultural nation with public policies in place that maintain racial harmony,² there are strong yet subdued tensions simmering below the surface of Singaporean society. Paranoia and anxiety over ethnicity in other words, are part of the Singaporean cultural landscape. However, Singapore maintains a happy facade of peace and harmony amongst a culturally and racially disparate population by successfully instilling a strong sense of loyalty and allegiance to the nation. Nationalism in other words, is very much part of everyday life in the nation-state. As a young adult, I found myself unable to fully understand Singaporean society's cultural attitudes towards ethnicity particularly since Singapore brands itself as multicultural. My sensitivity to issues surrounding ethnicity in particular perhaps stems from my belonging to neither one of the major racial categories (Malay, Chinese and Indian) but to an essentially hybrid minority or biracial group born out of the European colonization of Southeast Asia known as Eurasian. Concerns over ethnicity, in other words, became personal issues of belonging and identity to the homeland. Singaporean society's cultural attitudes towards ethnicity however, I have noticed, have now taken a new turn with the entry of permanent and temporary worker migrants into Singapore.

As part of Singapore's blueprint for globalization, modernity and domination on the global economic and financial stages, it has looked beyond its borders for an international workforce that not only reflects this global outlook but also keeps the engines of progress running.³

Encouraging non-Singaporeans to take up skilled and non-skilled occupations is not a new phenomenon in Singapore as the backbone of this nation-state's history is built on migrant labour. While Singaporeans trace their lineage to migrants, they consider new migrants those who have entered the country in the post-independence period, particularly the 1980s and beyond. However, the presence of these new migrants, who are colloquially referred to as 'foreigners' even though many have permanent residence and citizenship and hail from the very countries most Singaporeans consider their ancestral home, are highly disliked by Singaporeans, many of whom have been taking their grievances online. Attacking both the new migrants and the government for facilitating their entry into the country, it is perhaps fair to say that Singaporeans are attempting to make sense of their significance and place in a homeland that many feel is changing rapidly both ethnographically as well as culturally.

Thankfully, I am not the only one who finds such dissonance in Singapore society intriguing. Singapore's film industry has long been fascinated by this dissonance, with thriving underground and commercial movements existing side by side that provide critical commentary through metaphorical expression. By film, I refer particularly to the works of well known, acclaimed, respected and intellectually stimulating independent and mainstream film-makers Eric Khoo, Tan Pin Pin, Kelvin Tong and Jack Neo and to the films which have done well at the Singapore box-office such as *Army Daze* (Ong 1996). Khoo, for example, is influential in both independent and mainstream local cinema as writer, director and producer particularly through his Zhao Wei Films studio while others such as mainstream film-maker Neo's productions have resonated well with the Singapore cinema-going public and dominate the box-office.

In this book I put forward the idea that while on the surface Singapore may seem like a successful multicultural nation where diverse peoples live harmoniously together, it is instead a country whose citizens are grappling with existing anxieties over ethnicity which are now compounded by the increasing numbers of new migrants (skilled workers who have the opportunity to become permanent residents and unskilled temporary guest workers) entering the country. Singapore's multicultural identity is primarily made up of three broad ethnic groups – Chinese, Malay and Indian – with the Chinese by far being the largest community. While there is an 'Others' category which allows for those Singaporeans such as Arabs, Armenians and Eurasians who fall outside the Chinese, Malay and Indian groups to be classified, they are not as culturally nor ethnically recognizable because of their relatively small numbers.⁴ I argue that communities or individuals outside of these recognizable classifications are viewed with trepidation by Singapore society and that while the Chinese are the prevailing ethnic group, they do experience concerns regarding their identity and cultural traditions. I suggest that the new migrants entering the nation-state both permanently and temporarily – many of whom come from the ancestral homes of locally-born Singaporeans and from the surrounding Southeast Asian region – have created such unease and angst among citizens that it has led to many Singaporeans expressing themselves through xenophobic comments online. Yet the presence of the new migrants has curiously united Singaporeans like no other issue this society has encountered since independence.

My point of entry into mapping Singaporean anxieties of ethnicity and migration is through film. It is film that I use as a tool in various ways to understand and unpack this young yet disparate society. More than just a form of entertainment, Singapore films attempt to make sense of the Singapore-specific concerns which people are confronted with on a daily basis. These concerns take place against a thematic backdrop of high levels of cultural and linguistic diversity in this multicultural population, income disparity that defines and sometimes

segregates the classes, an omnipresent government and a high influx of foreign workers. This book uses films to launch into an understanding of Singapore society, therefore allowing for an interrogation into the ways in which the community reacts to the related topics of ethnicity and migration.

Multicultural Singapore

One of the distinctive things I remember from my childhood in Singapore was my ability to belt out almost every patriotic song ever written. Each morning, I sang the national anthem with my fellow schoolmates. At most music classes and school assemblies I learnt the latest national song that expressed love to country and national unity ‘regardless of ethnicity, language or religion’ as stressed in the Singapore National Pledge. Today I can still sing the songs of my childhood, such as ‘We Are Singapore’ (Harrison 1987) and ‘One People, One Nation, One Singapore’ – of which the chorus is quoted above – on demand. This is in part because these songs are still actively broadcast through Singapore media, particularly in the run up to Singapore’s National Day.

I recall that as a young adult in Singapore, my friends, colleagues and family always beamed with pride whenever they spoke of Singapore’s achievements as a peaceful, prosperous and modern nation where everyone lived harmoniously together despite ethnic diversity. Patriotism through music obviously works. However, the same people also frequently complained about the government and often spoke unflatteringly about ethnicities other than their own. Moreover, while such Singaporeans revel in Singapore’s modern global city-state status, they also hang on tightly to cultural traditions and organized religion as they aggressively oppose certain aspects of globalism.

Stemming from its history as a British colony and *entrepôt* trading centre, Singapore has a complex multicultural identity (Ang and Stratton 1995) that both unifies as well as divides ethnic communities (Gomes 2010). Multiculturalism takes pride of place in Singapore society. The country and its people are immensely proud of its achievements in establishing a seemingly peaceful and harmonious multiracial and multiethnic society. Singaporeans do revel in the products of multiculturalism which they strongly connect to and identify with such as an array of fabulous culinary delights and a unique hybridized local language known as ‘Singlish’ which boasts a combination of the different primary ethnic languages (Hokkien, Teowchew, Malay and Tamil) intermingled with English. At the same time, Singapore’s version of multiculturalism where people are classified into the Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others (CMIO) categories are, as Chua Beng Huat (2003b) argues, highlights difference rather than integration and is a way in which the state controls its disparate population.⁵

Racial and ethnic tensions are a ubiquitous but largely hidden aspect of everyday experience in contemporary Singapore (Velayutham 2009). These play out in quotidian encounters between people on a subtle often subconscious level. Such intercultural anxieties are deeply entrenched in a history that Singapore is still negotiating and coming to terms with. For instance, some Singaporeans may harbor feelings of suspicion about people and ethnicities outside their own communal group because of the way Singapore officially remembers its history which emphasizes a fear of Malay nationalism through the remembering of Malay-incited riots which took place in the 1950s and 1960s (Gomes 2010). The entry of new migrants who come to Singapore for work as unskilled or skilled workers, as international students or other reasons such as marriage, have challenged this society as it comes to terms

with a rapidly changing ethnographic landscape which goes beyond their previously understood Chinese-Malay-Indian nexus.

Enter the 'Foreign' Migrants

Since the 2000s Singaporeans have been incredibly critical of 'new' migrants – the overwhelming majority of whom come as workers – entering their country and have been expressing their anger through xenophobic comments online. Despite strict laws against racial vilification, these comments can be seen in some of the more popular online forums such as those in *Asiaone.com* (<http://www.asiaone.com/A1Home/A1Home.html>), *The Online Citizen: A Community of Singaporeans* (<http://theonlinecitizen.com/>), *Sam's Alfresco Haven: Celebrating Singapore's Golden Period!* (www.sammyboy.com) and *The TR Emeritus* (<http://www.tremeritus.com/>) formerly known as *The Temasek Review*, in personal weblog entries and on social media platforms. Known as 'foreign talent', these migrants are professional arrivals from Mainland China, South Asia, the Philippines and beyond who have been entering Singapore in droves since the mid-1990s. Unlike the transitional foreign domestic workers and unskilled labourers who have been flocking into Singapore since the 1980s, foreign talent migrants are educated professionals who often take up permanent residence in their adopted country. The Singapore government sees foreign talent migrants as an investment in Singapore's economic future and argues that it has to open the country's doors to new migrants because Singaporeans are not reproducing enough in order to replenish the workforce and new migrants will help take care of the ageing Singapore population. With these reasons in mind, the Singapore parliament endorsed *Population White Paper: A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore* which would see the nation's population increase to 6.9 million by 2030 through migration in February 2013.

Singapore has also been attracting large numbers of international students into the country as well as part of its plan to become a global education hub. In 2010 there are over 91,500 foreign students in Singapore (Yeoh and Lin 2012) with plans to increase numbers to 150,000 by 2015 (Davie 2012). The government has been making it attractive for these students to study in Singapore by providing them with government scholarships to study in public funded institutions as well as making permanent residence easy for them (Singapore Education 2006). Some foreign talent migrants might have been previously foreign students studying in Singapore who gained local employment.

The online xenophobic comments reveal that Singaporeans view foreign talent migrants with great suspicion as they anecdotally feel that they are threatening their livelihood and way of life. Moreover, the comments expose Singaporean displeasure at the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) whom they hold responsible for the influx of the foreign talent migrants as revealed by any online discussion by Singaporeans on the matter. Here Singaporeans note that they are no longer able to identify with Singapore due to the increasingly overcrowded and changing ethnographic landscape which they blame on government policies.

While Singaporeans have always grumbled about the PAP government and its policies in private, the rise of online forms of communication have allowed them to express their dissatisfaction with the government more prolifically and loudly. Doing so has created a space for Singaporeans to identify with each other on issues that they are concerned about which, most often, are caused by government policies: the cost of living, widening income gap and elitism of PAP members of parliament. However it is the presence of new migrants – transitional and permanent – that has dominated Singaporean online discourse like no other

issue; uniting Singaporeans and functioning as a catalyst to push locals into greater political awareness. Singaporeans, fed up with the influx of these new migrants – whom they call ‘foreigners’ despite many overseas born professionals taking up permanent residence and citizenship – have progressed from being apathetic to becoming politically aware as demonstrated by the greatest withdrawal of electoral support the PAP has ever encountered at both the General Elections and Presidential Elections in 2011.⁶

Unpacking Singapore Society through Film

Singapore films provide an accessible art form available to mass audiences. This allows for more nuanced and layered readings of its films by different audiences. Like other creative industries in Singapore, film is a forum for the production and consumption of fictional and creative works of art in a country where the government features prominently in everyday life. Arguably, the creative industries provide a less inhibited forum more free from government influence and control than the economic and political spheres primarily because subtlety through creative license is allowed to flourish and therefore communicate everyday concerns. It provides a space for a critical appraisal of Singapore and the ubiquitous role played by the government in Singaporean society⁷. Cinema’s space, in other words, allows audiences to choose, identify and decode films (Hall 1973) at different levels of appreciation and understanding.

In his assessment of the film and television scene in Singapore, Kenneth Paul Tan (2008) suggests that Singapore productions struggle to honestly and openly provide critical commentary of Singapore because of the dominance of an authoritarian government and because of the consumption needs and patterns of the audience. He notes, correctly, that television shows in particular, while popular with local audiences, have to follow certain strictly enforced codes of practice that leave productions toothless and banal. A possible reason for their popular consumption in Singapore lies in their conventional character portrayals and seemingly inoffensive narratives that mirror everyday life in Singapore. Yet, as I point out throughout this book, the portrayal of everyday life in Singapore is a useful device for unpacking the layers of Singapore society.

Tan suggests that the ability of Singapore’s most successful film-maker, Jack Neo, to not only entertain Singaporeans with films about everyday life but also generate approval by Singaporean leaders is testament to the lack of aggression present in Singapore films (K.P. Tan 2008: 147-48). Even though Neo’s films critique the Singapore government and its policies through political satire, as is the case in his 2002 production *Xiaohai Bu Ben/I Not Stupid* (*New Straits Times* 2004; Lim 2005), there is always resolution at the end with the message that government knows best and obeying government dictates leads to a successful Singapore and a prosperous self (K.P. Tan 2008: 147-48). While Tan’s assessment is not incorrect, I suggest that while the Singapore film industry is bound by stern guidelines, it still manages to question hegemonic discourses that on the surface seem to champion active support of the status quo.

The prolific growth of the Singapore film industry has been slowly attracting academic scholarship (e.g. Khoo 2005, Leow 2010, Marchetti 2005a and K.P. Tan 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010 and 2011), as film studies scholars attempt to explore and comprehend the industry in terms of the challenges it faces because of strict censorship laws and also in terms of how it

represents Singapore and what it means to Singaporeans. Recognition of Singapore films have become apparent through the local box office successes of commercial productions as well as the critical acclaim accorded to independently made films screened at local and international film festivals. At the opposition National Solidarity Party (NSP) charity screening of *The Blue Mansion* (Goei, 2009) on 13 November 2011, Singapore-born film-maker Glen Goei eloquently and passionately states during the question and answer session, available on YouTube, that although Singapore is highly developed, its people are unhappy. He says:

When I came back to Singapore [after living in Europe], I came back to a Singapore that is very different...[than what]...I grew up in. I grew up in Singapore in the 60s and 70s when life was more simpler but more happier. I came back twenty, thirty years later in the early 2000s ... Singapore had changed beyond recognition. It was, on the surface, a richer Singapore, you know. A glistening sparkling, glass, cement, steel all over the place. Shopping malls and MRT stations. But I felt that people were significantly less happy. (Goei, 2011)

Goei also describes his role as a film-maker when he says: 'As an artist I try to, in my work, to be a mirror to that society that I live' [*sic*]. While Goei refers to himself here, his words perhaps express what many film-makers in the local film industry also believe is their responsibility to Singapore society.

The Singapore film industry is comparatively young when compared to other significant and prolific Asian cinemas such as those in Hong Kong and India. In addition, Singapore films often look 'alien' to foreign audiences because they contain Singapore-specific cultural nuances. Some films, such as those by Jack Neo – including *Qián Bùgòu Yòng/Money No Enough* (1998) and *I Not Stupid* – have found commercial success because they inject a quintessentially Singapore flavour through language, employing Singlish (Singapore English) and Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, as well as likable Everyman characters with whom most Singaporeans can identify.

These Everyman characters are often portrayed as 'heartlanders', as they are popularly known, take on the roles of heroes and heroines in these films, which deal with contemporary struggles affecting Singaporeans, such as wealth, income, education, immigration, position in society, health and social ills education and finance. Locally made art-house productions – for example, Royston Tan's *15* (2002), Eric Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* (1995), *Be With Me* (2005) and Ekachai Uekrongtham's *Pleasure Factory* (2007) – are also in demand by (niche) Singaporean audiences since they are able to capture the complex nature of Singapore society by the sheer nature of their experimentation in style and format. Such films also sensitively portray underlying, confronting and controversial topics such as sexuality (e.g. *15* and *Be With Me*) and the sex trade (e.g. *Mee Pok Man* and *Pleasure Factory*).

This book thus turns to some enigmatic Singapore films to provide not just a starting point but a deeper understanding of Singapore society. In their own way, Singapore films capture the heartbeat of local society by expressing some of the anxieties Singaporeans have concerning ethnicity and migration that paradoxically both unite Singaporeans with each other, even as

they divide them. This book specifically looks at these anxieties through the overlapping topics of identity, memory and place which are played out through the strongly recurring theme of authoritarian leadership.

Singapore films, in other words, functions as a useful artifact as defined by E. Deidre Pribram, who suggests that it

conveys meanings beyond its tangible form, just as a more traditional archaeological artifact, such as an ancient shard of poetry, imparts a sense of or is open to interpretations about the past. An artifact is tethnicity evidence of other qualities: concepts, beliefs, meanings, times, and places. More than a material entity, an artifact is a means of expression and communication that absorbs aesthetic, social, and ideological concepts and practices. In other words, it absorbs histories. (Pribram 2002: 44)

National and state cinemas functioning as tools that document, reflect, unpack and critically appraise the societies that create them is nothing new to scholars, cinephiles and general audiences hungry to decipher any films that hint at social unrest or social ills. However, any cinema that does so in such a way that is coded for its own local audience is always worth a look. Singapore cinema falls into this category since it seems to exclusively be about Singapore and its people. To aid my investigation, I turn to other sources such as online comments by Singaporean netizens (people who actively use the Internet, particularly as a platform for commentary and discussion) who spiritedly discuss political and social issues openly on blogs, popular online forums and through social media⁸. I also refer to government policies, public exhibitions and film reviews. In addition, I turn to history and historical narrative in my analysis. This book is not an exhaustive study of Singapore films, which writers Uhde and Uhde (2010) have already successfully done. Instead, this book explores some of the complexities of Singapore multicultural society – in terms of the struggles and paranoia that concern its people regarding ethnicity and migration – by looking at some of the more critically and commercially successful films by some of the most well-known Singaporean film-makers, including Eric Khoo, Tan Pin Pin, Kelvin Tong, Jack Neo and Ong Keng Sen among others.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction to Singapore in terms of its cinema, its government and its people and to contextualize discussions of ethnicity and migration that follow. In this chapter I explore a few characteristics of Singapore films such as the featuring of everyday Singaporeans through the ‘Everyman’ figure and local cultural traits such as language and food. By looking at Singapore film as the ‘heartbeat’ of the nation, this chapter exposes some of the growing pains afflicting this young and successful nation. This chapter provides an introduction into Singapore society’s relationship with its government and suggests that it responds to the PAP government in ways that are both conventional and innovatively rebellious as the proceeding chapters will show. Chapter 1 also serves as an entry into the focus of this book: using specific films to reflect and analyze the ways in which ethnicity and migration affect Singaporeans.

Chapters 2 and 3 examine anxieties on ethnicity while Chapters 4 and 5 are dedicated to the struggles Singaporeans have towards new migrants. Chapter 2 discusses locally made English-language films in Singapore such as *Army Daze* and *One Leg Kicking* (Koh 2001)

which feature, unusually, a cast of mixed ethnicities. Most English-language films feature an ethnic Chinese cast usually speaking Singlish with splashes of Mandarin and Chinese dialects (Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese). While such films celebrate the government's idealized vision of multicultural harmony, with casts of characters seemingly colour blind to each other, they also rely on ethnic stereotypes for comedic effect. By looking at the ways in which the ethnic Chinese protagonist dominates the silver screen, as well as the portrayal of Eurasians in local cinema, this chapter suggests that Singapore may not be as multicultural in practice as it imagines itself to be.

Chapter 3 looks at the work of Singapore's most well-known independent documentary filmmaker, Tan Pin Pin by paying attention to the ethnic Singaporean-Chinese and their understanding and negotiation of culture and tradition in Singapore's changing physical landscape. Here I suggest that Tan's films 'rewrite' and 'reclaim' Singapore history while subtly questioning government discourse by challenging official remembering and revealing the price that has been paid for Singapore's journey to modernity particularly on Singaporean-Chinese. Tan's films do this by featuring the memories of everyday Singaporeans who are situated outside the official discourse of significant events in Singapore's history (e.g. the height of communism in colonial Singapore) and traditional everyday public events in the lives of ordinary Singaporeans (e.g. such as the cultural importance of burial rituals).

Chapter 4 moves the focus from Singaporean-Chinese to mainland Chinese migrants in Singapore. It is the first of 3 chapters dedicated to reflecting in the anxieties Singaporeans seem to feel with regard to the permanent and temporary migrants entering the country. By analyzing the film *Shier Lou/12 Storeys* by independent film-maker Eric Khoo, one of the most illustrious and significant individuals in the Singapore film industry, this chapter examines the unease and suspicion Singaporeans have of the mainland Chinese, many of whom they believe are taking advantage of locals and living off the resources of the country. As a film-maker Khoo is highly regarded for his distinctively pessimistic work featuring the lower working classes. This chapter suggests that while Khoo's films seem to highlight the social issues of a particular group of Singaporeans, in reality the films really present some of the everyday issues gnawing at the broader Singapore society. This chapter also provides an insight into the xenophobic attitudes expressed by Singaporeans online.

Chapter 5 looks at the 2005 Kevin Tong film *The Maid*, a Singapore-made horror production featuring a foreign domestic worker as its protagonist. Released to very favourable reviews in the local press, the film was used by critics to praise the development of the local film industry, while the social commentary on the foreign domestic worker experience in Singapore was ignored. This chapter aims to address this lack of commentary on the issues surrounding foreign domestic service raised in the film. Doing so reveals multilayered representations of social order in Singapore based on ethnicity and class, where the images of foreign maids are dramatized, reconstructed and consumed in various discursive forms by various social agents.

Chapter 6 brings the discussions of ethnic disparity and migrant worry together. Here I look at language in local films and observe the significance of Singlish (Singapore English) to unite and empower Singaporeans. This chapter suggests that Singlish in Singapore films not only captures the uniqueness of being Singaporean but it is a vernacular that Singaporeans use

as a non-political form of defiance against the ruling party and its unpopular new migrant policies. Here I re-emphasize the observation I make in previous chapters that the presence of the new migrants functions as a force for unity in a culturally and ethnically disparate population.

Chapter 1

Coping With Everyday Life: Singapore Films, Heartbeat of the Nation

In the past decade, Singaporeans have developed a fondness for local, particularly commercial productions, as seen in box office returns. Commercial productions by film-makers such as Jack Neo, Glen Goei, Royston Tan and Kevin Tong have enjoyed enormous local success because of their increasingly sophisticated high production values.¹ Likewise, independent and avant-garde films by other prominent film-makers such as Eric Khoo, Djinn and documentary film-maker Tan Pin Pin have been playing to packed, albeit limited, screenings at local and international theatres, events and festivals, even though their narratives and plots sometimes seem initially unclear. Films by independent film-makers that earn critical success are often less financially successful due to limited screenings at art-house venues. Since the renaissance of Singapore cinema in the early 1990s, the most successful Singapore films such as those by the country's undisputedly best known film-maker Jack Neo – almost exclusively feature the typical concerns of everyday Singaporeans such as wealth, income, education, immigration, position in society, health and social ills. These themes are successfully woven together by the Singapore-specific cultural traits of language and food. Language and food, after all, are the very elements Singaporeans feel passionate about principally in terms of national identity and belonging to the homeland.

Like other modern multicultural societies such as America, Australia and Hong Kong, Singapore uses cinema to portray, reflect and understand the sociocultural effects and conditions of multiculturalism. Prolific Singaporean cinema studies commentator Kenneth Paul Tan (2010, 2011) astutely observes that locally made films provide a useful platform that allows Singaporean anxieties and struggles to be performed and played out. These struggles and anxieties are a result of Singapore's in-between position as a post-industrial global city successfully chasing global capital (K.P. Tan 2011) with a value system that is flexibly connected to its Asian roots.

Film can offer insight into complex nationalist societies such as Singapore not only through readings of their films but also in terms of critical attention and box office receipts.² Even though Singapore is a global city state, its society is rooted in cultural values selected and promoted by the government in order to galvanize the fractured communal groups into a homogenous, patriotic and obedient entity that functions primarily to create a wealthier and more economically successful nation state. Singapore-made films that have had an impact on audiences such as scholars, film reviewers and general filmgoers alike have done so because they tap into Singapore society's heartbeat – the everyday concerns of Singaporeans – exceedingly well.

A number of Singapore-made films such as those by Jack Neo (for instance his *I Not Stupid/Xiaohai Bu Ben* and *Money No Enough/Qian Bu Gou Yong* series made in the late 1990s and through the 2000s) manage to circumvent the strict policies that severely frown upon criticism of the government in the media, and at the same time celebrate Singapore society and its cultural identity.³ So while loyalty to nation equals loyalty to the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) governance, Singapore films attempt to make full use of this

phenomenon of patriotic nationhood by exploring and rejoicing in what it is to be Singaporean.

The local in Singapore films

Work by some key film-making industry figures – such as independent film-maker Eric Khoo, mainstream film-maker Jack Neo and other emerging yet prominent film-makers such as Royston Tan and Kelvin Tong – have garnered the attention of film studies and cultural studies scholars, cinephiles, Asian art-house crowds and local audiences who have been seduced and intoxicated by the exclusively local content present in the work.⁴ The growing success of the local film industry amongst its home-grown audience is reflected in two significant consequences: the financial success some of these films enjoy, and the emergence of serious film appreciation societies dedicated to Singapore cinema such as the Singapore Film Commission and the online societies *Sinema* (2012) and *SINdie* (2012).

Moreover, a number of contemporary Singapore-made films have been enjoying increasing financial success and have been making it to the Singapore top ten charts since 1998. The table below shows the financial success of some local films with Singaporean audiences.

Film	Year	Top Ten Chart Position	Box Office Takings (SGD)
<i>Money No Enough/ Qian Bu Gou Yong</i> (Jack Neo)	1998	#2	\$5.8m
<i>Liang Po Po: The Movie/Liang Po Po Chong Chu Jiang Hu</i> (Bi Lian Teng)	1999	#3	\$3.03m
<i>I Not Stupid/ Xiaohai Bu Ben</i> (Jack Neo)	2002	#4	\$3.8m
<i>Homerun/Pao Ba Haizi</i> (Jack Neo)	2003	#10	\$2.35m
<i>The Best Bet/Turan Facai</i> (Jack Neo)	2004	#8	\$2.53m
<i>I Not Stupid Too/ Xiaohai Bu Ben 2</i> (Jack Neo)	2006	#3	\$4.18
<i>881</i> (Royston Tan)	2007	#10	\$3.5

Figure 1.1: Top ten chart positions and box office takings of Singapore films, 1998-2007 (Uhde & Uhde 2010: 321-22).

One of the Singapore-centric features in Singapore films which could perhaps explain the growing popularity of this cinema with its domestic audiences is the familiar and local. These include featuring the everyday Singaporean through the Everyman and the cultural traits of food and language. The Everyman is the everyday Singaporean whom local audiences would easily recognize. Almost always, the Everyman displays essentialised or imagined Singapore-specific behavior such as racial stereotypes and the over the top use of Singapore English (Singlish). Yet this figure is also able to represent and expresses the everyday concerns of ordinary Singaporeans.

***The Everyman: Representing Singaporean concerns through film*⁵**

Singapore is a young nation. Like some other former Western colonies in Asia (e.g. Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak) and Africa (e.g. Southern Rhodesia and Kenya Colony), Singapore achieved independence from its colonial masters in the 1960s. In 1963 the British declared Singapore and Malaysia independent from colonial rule. Independence resulted in these former colonies forming a federation. However, 23 months later the federation with Malaysia dissolved acrimoniously and Singapore became a sovereign nation. Unlike other postcolonial nations at the time, Singapore lacked a strong precolonial history other than its links to Malay culture and specifically to the Sultanate of Johor. These links, however, were not rooted firmly enough to give Singaporeans an effective precolonial national identity because of the migration of different Asian and European peoples into Singapore during British colonial rule. The immigration patterns favoured the Chinese who emigrated from Southern China and whose descendants then went on to populate the island and emerge as the most dominant ethnic demographic in Singapore. Prior to migrating to Singapore in the 1800s and 1900s, both the Chinese and the Malays from the Malay Peninsula and the Indonesian Archipelago had very limited precolonial contact with Singapore, with the exception of the relationship between Imperial China and Sultanate of Kedah.⁶ This lack of a strong common cultural identity between the ethnic Chinese and the ethnic Malays posed challenges for a postcolonial Singapore government determined to create a unified national identity. It is against this background that Singapore films can be read as contributing to an ongoing yet unofficial project of providing a space for discussion of identity in Singapore (Owen 2005).

National cinemas reveal a nation's attempt to deal with sociocultural issues such as trauma, confusion of identity and commemoration. Film-makers and local audiences turn to cinema in order to confront, dissect and create ideas of self, community and culture. Early Singapore films, for instance, reflect the many layers of the diasporic identity of Singaporean people as a settler society. The 1920s to the 1960s were dominated by locally made Malay films. While Singapore's film industry was incredibly successful through joint productions with Malaya, particularly during the colonial period and just after independence from British rule, there was a dearth of film productions of any kind in the first three decades after independence. The leaders of newly independent postcolonial Singapore have often made it clear that it was a conscious decision on their part at the time to concentrate on the economy, rather than any kind of development of the arts and culture, as part of nation building for a young, under-resourced and multi-ethnic country. Malay films were produced by studio heavyweights such as the Cathay Organisation and very much reflected the Malay community and culture in both Singapore and Malaysia at the time. While there were different kinds of genres such as melodramas also known as *sandiwara* and horror films, most Malay language films were musical pieces styled after Bollywood cinema. This is because of the presence of Indian directors in the Malay cinematic world who, unsurprisingly, used the successful Bollywood musicals as templates.

Perhaps the most famous films of the 1950s and 1960s from the Malay musical genre were the films of P. Ramlee. Ramlee was an entertainer extraordinaire. Amongst other things, he was an actor, comedian, musician, director, scriptwriter, conductor, dancer, choreographer and composer. His films such as *The Legend of Hang Tuah* (1957) and *Ahmad Albab* (1968), which he both directed and starred in, were formulaic musical comedies with himself as the romantic lead. Audiences, regardless of ethnic persuasion, were generally attracted to P. Ramlee films for the characters he played, which also embodied the Everyman.⁷

Ramlee's films were popular amongst the Malay community in Singapore and Malaysia in all probability because they reflected Malay *kampong* (village) life and tradition. The films presented not only a cinematic escape for audiences but, more importantly, they provided the Malay community with an identifiable, uniquely Malay identity in an ever increasingly multicultural, economically progressive and cosmopolitan Singapore and Malaysia. Ramlee's films, after all, were screened during the unsettling times of post-war colonial Singapore and Malaysia when racial unrest and communist uprisings were not uncommon. His films were also popular throughout the periods of political uncertainty during the height of tensions between Malaysia and Singapore as they attempted unity through federation and after Singapore's expulsion in 1965. Through all the political, economic and social unrest and uncertainty, Ramlee's formulaic films provided a form of unified identity for Malays and non-Malays alike. Older Singaporeans from the different ethnic backgrounds outside the Malay community, such as the Eurasians, Indians and Chinese, still reminisce fondly about the P. Ramlee films they used to watch in the cinema and on television in their youth.

While Singapore cinema was mostly dormant in the 1970s and 1980s – with the exception of a few productions which had minor commercial success (such as the English-language Bobby A. Suarez directed 1981 film *They Call Her Cleopatra Wong*) which was a joint production between Singapore and the Philippines) – it was during the late 1990s that Singapore cinema started to flourish in popularity and find critical success.

The past decade and a half has witnessed the Singapore film industry coming into its own with locally made productions becoming as popular with Singaporeans as the usual Hollywood fare. Some Singapore-made films are transnational productions (e.g. the Hong Kong–Singapore studio Raintree Pictures), some feature non-Singaporean cast and crew (e.g. Kenneth Bi's 2005 film *Rice Rhapsody*) and they are sometimes locally treated foreign themes (e.g. Glen Goei's 1998 film *Forever Fever* – Singapore's version of John Badham's 1977 hit *Saturday Night Fever*).⁸ Singapore films provide an avenue for contemporary Singaporeans to artistically articulate, spread and consume locally made films that narrate Singaporean issues and concerns in addition to creating a sense of belonging in the culturally diverse nation and ever-evolving global city.

Singapore films are often used as a platform for engaging, demystifying and questioning the ruling PAP government. The government is often woven into the fabric of the narrative of Singapore films that examine, narrate and provide commentary on community. While it can be argued that all Singapore films feature the government in some way, shape or form because of the heavy investments made by the authorities into the local film industry, the portrayal of the government in Singapore films reveal the complicated and intricate relationship between Singapore society and the ruling PAP. Ironically, Singapore films are able to explore and contemplate Singaporean concerns precisely because of government investment in developing this fledgling creative industry. With the release of the Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts in 1989, Singaporean leaders started investigating culture and the arts as necessary developments for Singapore (Ministry of Information, Communication and Arts 2008: 1-15). The government's reasons for this included creating a sense of belonging to Singapore through cultural heritage and the awareness that the creative industry is a lucrative and growing worldwide phenomenon. Film-making courses, for instance, are now available at polytechnics (Ngee Ann Polytechnic) and universities (LASALLE College for the Arts) as well as offered by private and specialized providers

(Objectifs Films). The film industry has also been helped by overseas investors, private or philanthropic organizations and self-funding.

Jack Neo's commercially successful films *Money No Enough* and *I Not Stupid*, and other similar commercial productions, appeal to local audiences because of the injection of quintessentially Singaporean flavour through language such as Singlish (Singapore English) and Chinese dialects such as Hokkien, as well as their likable Everyman characters. The beauty of his films lies in their ability to weave the government into the context of the film. For example, the plots of *I Not Stupid* and its sequel *I Not Stupid Too* were driven by Singapore's education policies and featured underachievers coping in academically competitive Singapore. In Jack Neo's *Wo Zai Zheng Fu Bu Men De Ri Zi/Just Follow Law* (2007) features the Everyman as a hapless civil servant struggling within the ridiculously inflexible Singapore civil service.

These Everyman character are often 'heartlanders', as they are popularly known. They take on the roles of heroes and heroines in these films, which deal with contemporary struggles affecting Singaporeans, such as wealth, income, education, immigration, position in society, health and social ills education and finance (Uhde & Uhde 2010: 72-155). These include making sure that children get through the education system and into local universities and realizing the dream of living comfortable middle class lives free from working long hours and a healthy disposable income.

Singapore art-house productions have also managed to capture the complex nature of the Everyman in Singapore by the sheer nature of their experimentation in style and format. Some Singaporean films such as Djinn's *Perth* (2004) and Eric Khoo's *Be With Me* (2005) are non-commercial productions with disjointed narratives, confusing storylines and slow-moving scenes. Others, for example, Royston Tan's *15* (2002), Khoo's *Mee Pok Man* (1995) and Ekachai Uekrongtham's *Pleasure Factory* (2007) – are also in demand by (niche) Singaporean audiences since they are able to capture the complex nature of Singapore society by the sheer nature of their experimentation in style and format. Such films also sensitively portray underlying, confronting and controversial topics such as sexuality (e.g. *15* and *Be With Me*) and the sex trade (e.g. *Mee Pok Man* and *Pleasure Factory*).

Another Singaporean art-house film-maker of particular note whose films have been lauded for featuring everyday Singaporeans but on the fringe of society is documentary film-maker Tan Pin Pin. Tan's most well-known works include *Moving House* (2001), *Singapore GaGa* (2005) and *Invisible City* (2007), which have played to limited but packed local screenings and at film festivals.

Tan's work attempts to make sense of Singapore's multilayered identity by engaging in the unconventional and non-mainstream by featuring the everyday lives and experiences of the elderly and the disabled, for instance. Her work provides avenues for those on the fringe to voice their thoughts on the complex layers of identity in Singapore. Tan's opus *Singapore GaGa*, for instance, features individuals who are faceless, forgotten or eccentric because of their inability to fit nicely into the everyday Singaporean social and cultural landscapes forged through government projects that emphasize wealth and popular consumerism. These include both buskers at train stations who are seen by hundreds of people every day but are largely ignored, and acclaimed musicians who are underappreciated and misunderstood due to

the esoteric nature of their work (for example, internationally recognized yet locally undervalued toy pianist Margaret Leng Tan). *Singapore GaGa* also features students from a madrasa (Islamic school) enthusiastically and happily belting out patriotic tunes, and a former communist singing propaganda songs. Madrasas are few and far between in Singapore, as are former communists since most have passed away, migrated overseas, are reformed, or have been muted in some way. *Singapore GaGa*, in other words, reveals identity in Singapore to be not simply the product of a one-dimensional government project, but rather one that is highly complex.

Sometimes the Everyman takes the form of easily recognizable caricatures or essentialised characters that further certain stereotypes in Singapore when it comes to depictions of ethnic minorities (e.g. *Army Daze* and *One Leg Kicking*). While on the one hand these characters may be able to represent and express the concerns of Singaporeans, on the other hand, they present an added perspective for analysis in terms of their construction – an issue I take up in the following chapter on the portrayal of ethnicity in Singapore comedies. Yet the Everyman is quintessentially Singaporean in the sense that they display Singaporean characteristics such as speaking in the widely spoken Singlish.

The success of the Everyman is unique when compared with other well-known state-based cinemas. While the Everyman is sometimes the hero in Hollywood cinema, his ordinariness is shattered through the extraordinary experiences he faces. Ordinary yet troubled teenager John Connor's development into a visionary and inspirational leader is documented in *Terminator: Judgment Day* (1991) and *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles* (2008-2009). Others include action heroes with troubled pasts but whose goal is to right wrongs (such as Vietnam War veteran Rambo), or conquer the odds for self-fulfillment (such as Rocky Balboa). Meanwhile, the Everywoman overcomes traditionally set gender mindsets by questioning female stereotypes. *Thelma and Louise* challenged notions of female subservience by killing, humiliating or robbing any man who attempted to take advantage of them, while Samantha adopted the sexual appetite of the quintessential promiscuous man in *Sex and the City*.

Stuart Hall (1973) explains that there is a symbiotic communication flow between broadcasters and audiences, where broadcasters encode their productions with messages within a framework of knowledge familiar to audiences. Moreover, these messages are constructed within the cultural framework of the audiences. Audiences thus find enjoyment in these productions because they recognize the messages in them. These messages, according to Janet Staiger (1993), are not simply embedded in a text, waiting to be discovered by audiences. Rather, the meanings of these messages are products of their own particular or general historical events.

Cultural Traits – Language and Food

Singapore cinema – like other non-Hollywood film industries – while intentionally destined for an overseas market, is strongly local in content. The cultural traits that Singaporeans highly identify with are language and food. Language and food, as I reveal later in this book, not only help galvanize Singaporeans towards each other but may assist in helping them warm up to the new migrants entering into the country.

The Singapore accent and Singlish language play significant roles in allowing multi-ethnic Singaporeans to identify with Singapore and with each other (Chua 2003a). While matching language to nation is not a country-specific phenomenon, it is Singlish that has become an unofficial symbol of Singapore's multicultural national identity. Singlish is fundamentally a creolized variety of English with the Chinese languages of Hokkien and Teochew intermingled with Malay and some Tamil, thus displaying multicultural Singapore at its best. While most Singaporeans speak their mother tongue in private, Singlish is understood more readily between the various ethnicities, even though English is the official language used in government and in schools. Singapore films in the English language often take advantage of this phenomenon and include a healthy mix of Singlish in their soundtracks and scripts in order to cast a wider net for local audiences.

Singapore cinema today is dominated by Chinese-language films with a moderate number of English-language productions. While Malay-language films dominated the earlier years of the local film industry, such films are unfortunately all but extinct today. The same can be said of Indian films with the exception of Eric Khoo's *My Magic* (2008), filmed in the Tamil language. The uniqueness of Singapore cinema however, is the non-exclusive domination of a single language or dialect in a film production. For instance, Chinese language films often support a mixture of the dominant Chinese dialects (Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese) as well as Mandarin and English.

Food also plays a significant part in Singaporean national identity and national solidarity (Tarulevich 2003). The annual Singapore Day (SG Day) events that are held in cities hosting large numbers of overseas Singaporeans are testament to the lengths Singaporeans go to for familiar cuisine. At the SG Day in Melbourne in 2008, there was an abundance of hawker food served from three separate pavilions. Each pavilion was host to hawkers dishing out Singapore favourites such as *satay* (barbequed meat on a stick), *ice kacang* (sweetened ice shavings served with red bean dessert), *chendol* (coconut and molasses ice desert), *hokkien mee* (fried seafood and pork noodle/vermicelli dish), chicken rice and chilli crab. Some of the hawkers in attendance are based in food centres around Singapore and were flown in specially to provide authenticity to the occasion. Participants of the event lined up for anywhere between 45 minutes to an hour for a small bowl or plate of their favourite Singaporean hawker food. The event, which was successfully spread by the online media, was attended by an estimated 11,000 Singaporeans (Ee 2008).

In their enthusiastic discussion of Singapore cinema, Tan, Lee and Aw (2003) note that food is one of the recurring themes to dominate locally made films. In some instances, food becomes included in the titles of films such as *Chicken Rice War* (Cheah 2000) and *Rice Rhapsody* are anything to go by. Television gets a similar treatment. *Singapore Flavours* (2010) is a 13-part Singaporean television food series with English subtitles, which appears to be intended for an overseas audience. The series is in Mandarin, Japanese and English and features hosts that travel around the globe in search of Singapore food. Australia's SBS Two television channel is one channel that promotes the series which is described in the *EnhanceTV* website (<http://www.enhancetv.com.au/shop/product.php?productid=163286&cat=332&page=8>) as: 'Singapore has a rich and unique food culture which has been exported around the world. This 13-part series will take viewers on a culinary tour of cities around the world to investigate the popularity of Singapore dishes overseas. Each week, the program will visit restaurants and check if the dish retains its authenticity or has been modified to suit foreign tastes.'

The series seems to have multiple functions for both international and local audiences. *Singapore Flavours* functions as an excellent tool to encourage Singapore tourism through food, directed at Chinese and Japanese-speaking audiences. Singapore, like the rest of the world, recognizes the significance of the Chinese tourist market while acknowledging the Japanese tourist market as still strong. By targeting foreign audiences and revealing to them the transnational nature of Singaporean cuisine, *Singapore Flavours* functions to inform audiences of Singapore's international reach. It provides Singapore with a softer international image that focuses on lifestyle rather than the more serious and complex images of Singapore as a successful and hard-nosed economy with incredible social stability due to its authoritarian government, or a sterile society dominated by humourless and overworked workers. The series also promotes a form of Singaporean (trans)nationalism for Singaporeans both at home and overseas. This show thus promotes that sense of pride of nation through the seemingly innocuous topic of Singaporean food as it travels overseas.

Featuring the local food certainly provides Singaporeans with a link to nation and to each other. Singapore films are awash with productions that feature familiar local flavour that Singaporeans cannot seem to get enough of. Singapore cinema, in other words, is more than entertainment but an art form that express the heartbeat of the nation.

Art as a Tool for Discussing Society

Cinema is more than just a medium for popular entertainment. It is an art form that young nations such as Singapore use to express the collective consciousness of their people. Often such social commentary will then be consumed and analyzed by the viewing audience. In an essay entitled 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' on the incorporation of national allegory in Third World texts, Fredric Jameson implies that art can 'be a political act, with real consequences' (1986: 67). Art of any culture, regardless of where it comes from, is a creative allegory of the collective society where it is a powerful signifier of a culture's collective consciousness. Most creative texts, regardless of their national origin contain national allegory of some sort which readers desire to consume. American novels, such as John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) are often labeled and marketed as the 'great American novel' (Brown 1935: 1-14). These texts are considered canonical texts in American Studies.⁹

Likewise, Hollywood cinema is almost always about American society, regardless of genre. For example, fantasy film genres often provide metaphors for a society's cultural mores. In Tim Burton's *Edward Scissorhands*, paranoia and suspicion in American society is explored through the relationship artificial man Edward Scissorhands (Johnny Depp) has with a suburban American neighbourhood. The film, set in a 1950s/1990s hybridized era, places Edward, a kind-hearted yet bizarre young man with scissors for hands, in American suburbia. While popular at first, Edward becomes the pariah of the town because he looks and behaves differently from the rest of the members of the neighbourhood (Cooper 1990). The neighbourhood then attempts to destroy Edward at the end of the film. *Edward Scissorhands* has been described as an eerie echo of Joseph McCarthy's communist witch-hunts of the 1950s (Tranter 2006). This film thus deconstructs and questions 1950s Hollywood cinema's representation of that era by focusing on the tensions of suburban America. Furthermore it questions earlier Hollywood portrayals of this period as being perfect and innocent, as

reflected in the film *Please Don't Eat The Daisies* (1960), and television programmes such as *Father Knows Best* (1954-60) and the nostalgic *Happy Days* (1974-84). Likewise, Singapore films provide pleasure to local audiences precisely because it is, unsurprisingly, is the only cinema available to Singaporeans which feature the local and the familiar.

One purpose of art therefore is to express a society's political and national concerns. Cultural theorist James Clifford (1988) notes that art is representative of the society it comes from. This is particularly relevant in a society undergoing the transformations of modernity where the tensions between the contemporary, Westernization and cultural traditions are revealed. Such is the case with Hong Kong cinema.

Scholars such as Ackbar Abbas and David Bordwell have long argued that Hong Kong people have a symbiotic relationship with their cinema (Ackbar 1997: 16-62; Bordwell 2000: 1-17). They observe that Hong Kong cinema represents the 'pulse' of Hong Kong society and references the collective community's trauma, angst and fear. Two distinctive periods in Hong Kong history when its cinema captured the essence of its people occurred in the 1960s – when the populace was coping with the various changes that the colony was experiencing due to modernity – and in the 1980s to the 1990s – in anticipation of the British handover to China in 1997. Veteran martial arts film-maker Chang Cheh (1999) perhaps best explains the reason why Hong Kong people value their cinema so much as a tool that dramatizes situations that affect them when he notes that cinema is the most prominent and prolific art form in this colony. This seems appropriate – when compared to the civilizations of Europe, America and most parts of Asia – as Hong Kong at 'over one hundred years old' is still a very young society (Zhang 1999:16).

Singapore's Growing Pains

Like Hong Kong, Singapore is a relatively young society which achieved financial stability and economic success early in its national history.¹⁰ It is a country whose economic growth has been undeniably phenomenal, having begun almost immediately after independence. Scratching beneath this utopian facade however, reveals a nation and a citizenry undergoing growing pains. Like the people of Hong Kong, Singaporeans also turn to their cinema to make sense of their collective circumstance. This collective circumstance has to do with the complexities associated with the city state's rapid transformation from a developing postcolonial multicultural nation to a high-tech global city with an increasingly transnational and transitional population. While Singaporeans are immensely proud of Singapore's achievements on the world stage, they cope with the effects and consequences of globalism. Singapore is a nation that struggles with its position as a global city while also managing being a post-industrial nation with traditional anxieties (K.P. Tan 2011). A list of contributing factors in Singapore's growing pains, which are discussed in various overlapping forms throughout this book, follows.

- ***A strong ethnic Chinese demographic in a demographically Malay-centric geographic region***

Singapore has a large ethnic Chinese population even though it is in the middle of the Malay Archipelago. This is because Singapore was an attractive place for Chinese immigrants fleeing from war, famine and poverty in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries when

Singapore was still under British rule. Singapore proved a welcoming place for the hundreds of thousands of mainly Han Chinese arriving from Southern China due to the abundance of work available, the protection and stability offered by the British, and the colonizers' policy of non-intervention into the affairs of the Asian communities that settled on the island. However, the high population of ethnic Chinese in the Malay-centric region proved to be unsettling for both groups, who found difficulties cohabitating in this multicultural environment, particularly in the 1960s (Gomes 2010).

The racial unrest that ensued between the (Singapore) Chinese and the (Malaysian) Malays resulted in open conflicts between these two communal groups and eventually Singapore's expulsion from the Federation of Malaysia after 23 difficult months in August 1965. To say that the political situation at the time was highly charged is an understatement; the Malays were highly suspicious of the Chinese in both Singapore and Malaysia in terms of their involvement in communism and the fear that the Malays would be left behind due to Chinese entrepreneurship.

After Singapore's expulsion from the federation however, the PAP managed to create a multicultural policy based on very strict laws against racial vilification, and education campaigns promoting racial harmony. In addition, the PAP highlighted the culture of the ethnic Chinese as the culture of Singapore (Gomes 2010). Commentators on Singapore – such as former Australian Prime Minister Gough Whitlam – have accused the government of creating a 'Chinese' identity for the nation even though the state claims to be multicultural (Grattan et al. 2005). The creation of Singapore as a Singapore-Chinese state was particularly evident during the 'Asian values' debate in the 1990s when Lee Kuan Yew openly stated that Singapore's 'Asian values' were strongly rooted in selected tenets of Chinese Confucianism.¹¹

In the process of creating a Singaporean identity that is strongly rooted in the culture of the ethnic Chinese pioneers, Singapore downplayed Malay culture. While the government gave the Malay community some public acknowledgement through language – by making Malay the official language of Singapore and by using Malay lyrics for the Singapore national anthem known as the *Majulah Singapura* (Progress Singapore) – such gestures were no more than superficial. The Malays have long felt displaced in Singapore due to government policies. For instance, one of the central aspects of their culture – community through the *kampung* (Malay village) – was disturbed through the destruction of *kampongs* to make way for progress in land-scarce Singapore. While the Malays joined the Chinese and others in high-rise living, in government built and maintained council apartments known as Housing & Development Board (HDB) flats, they did so with a heavy heart. This is because the Malays felt an important aspect of their culture – communal living – was being eradicated due to the government's policy of HDB blocks reflecting the demographics of the country (Sin 2002). Singapore, in other words, frowns on the creation of ethnic ghettos in HDB estates and blocks. As Malays are commonly known to make up approximately 13.6 per cent of the Singapore population, then the residents of any block of HDB flats must include only 13.6 per cent Malays.

The government actively distinguishes ethnic Chinese in Singapore from mainlanders not only because mainland China is communist, but primarily because it eradicated Confucian Chinese culture during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). The Singapore government's

creation of a unique Singaporean identity based on the culture of the ethnic Chinese settlers and divorced from the events and developments of communist China proved so successful that Singaporean-Chinese today face an identity crisis through their outright distaste for mainlanders who have more recently migrated to the city state. Mainlanders have been steadily streaming into and settling in Singapore en masse since the mid-1990s, primarily for work. Many have also migrated permanently to Singapore. High-profile Chinese immigrants include international film stars Jet Li and Gong Li. Singaporeans, Chinese and otherwise, - have unleashed their resentment at mainlanders entering Singapore upon the government, who they believe has turned against 'True Singaporeans' by courting mainlanders and other new migrants to take up work visas and permanent residence. Singaporeans use online platforms such as blogs, websites, forums and social media to emotionally state that new migrants do not deserve to enjoy the fruits of Singapore, which was born out of their ancestors' hard work and sacrifice.¹²

- ***Increasingly diverse multi-ethnic and multicultural society***

Singapore's population is changing. In the first couple of decades after independence Singapore's population reflected the broad Chinese-Malay-Indian racial demographics which came to define the Singapore ethnographic landscape. While the Chinese-Malay-Indian groupings did not distinguish the different ethnic groups within these racial categories, sometime in the 1990s the government started acknowledging more specific ethnic groupings on the compulsory identification cards Singaporeans carry with them.¹³ However, by then the Singaporean ethnographic landscape had started to transform, due to an increase in both transient and permanent residents flocking to Singapore for work.

Transient migrants, predominantly from other Asian nations, who enter the country for employment as unskilled labourers and skilled professionals – known as 'foreign talent' – have been a cause for concern amongst those Singaporean citizens who either settled in pre-independent Singapore or who trace their lineage back to settlers who arrived when the nation was still a British colony. Post-independence migrants pose a kind of trauma for the citizenry, and this is perhaps caused by Singapore's uneven immigration policy trends between 1965 and the late 1970s. Initially in the first decade of independence emphasizing strict controls over permanent and temporary migrants as a means to establish its identity as an independent state, Singapore started to increasingly relax its immigration policies to allow skilled and unskilled labour to feed the juggernaut of modernity. In 1970, for instance, foreign workers in Singapore made up 3.2 per cent of the labour force. By 2000 this had leapt to 29.2 per cent (Yeoh et al. 1999). By June 2014, Singapore's population had reached 5.47 million, including 1.6 million non-resident foreigners (Tham 2014).

- ***An ambitiously cosmopolitan society that enjoys wealth and materialism, but also values conservatism through the practice of traditional cultural values and adherence to strong religious beliefs***

Singaporean society presents a fascinating culture of contradiction. On the one hand Singaporeans are cosmopolitan and progressive. They revel in Singapore's strong material culture and enjoy its healthy nightlife and entertainment scene. On the other hand, Singapore society is profoundly conservative. This conservatism is rooted in cultural values and traditions that are tied to ethnicity and religion. Singaporeans celebrate with vigour the traditional festivals, events and superstitions dictated by their respective ethnic cultures. For

instance, the Chinese practice of giving *hong baos* (red packets filled with money) to children and unmarried adults during Chinese New Year. *Hong baos* must contain amounts of money in even numbers for good luck since odd numbers are bad luck in Chinese culture. Although ethnic cultural traditions are passed down from generation to generation, it is religion that has become increasingly popular and intrinsically part of everyday life in Singapore.

Islam, Buddhism/Taoism and Hinduism are ritualistically practiced by Malay, Chinese and Indian Singaporeans, respectively.¹⁴ Moreover, Islam is the faith of all ethnic Malays in Singapore and neighbouring Malaysia and an essential part of their everyday cultural life. So if a person is born ethnically Malay, they are automatically Muslim since ethnicity, culture and religion are synonymous of each other in this case. While Islam, Buddhism/Taoism and Hinduism are religions that have successfully circulated in South East Asia for centuries, Christianity is the relatively 'new' faith that is making a profound impact on the Asian region as a whole. The first waves of Christianity arrived with European and American colonial powers in Asia as far back as the fifteenth century.¹⁵ Christianity is now a growing religion with not only new converts but also expanding denominations that are taking root in Singapore. Some very well-known and popular churches are home-grown with expanding ministries overseas, known as mega-churches, such as the New Creation Church (founded 1984) and City Harvest Church (founded 1989) boasting five-figure memberships. Often offshoots of Baptist, Evangelical and Charismatic branches of Christianity, these new Christian communities minister to huge congregations, have very healthy finances and boast well-known Singaporeans among their congregations. For example popular Mandarin pop singer Sun Ho is one of the co-founders of the City Harvest Church counts and the wife of its principal founder, Pastor Kong Hee.¹⁶

- ***Its youthfulness as an independent nation and the scripting of a national story through the officially sanctioned narrative known as The Singapore Story***

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Singapore is a former British colony (1919-1963) and settler society which became an independent nation in 1965 after being part of a short-lived Malaysian Federation (1963-1965). Under the British, Singapore's population became host to Asian migrants primarily from China, India and the Malay Archipelago, as well as the Middle East (Arabs), Armenia and beyond. Often, these migrants were traders or individuals drawn to the growing city in search of work and fortune. Since independence, Singapore has become a global financial centre with robust and diversified national industries including manufacturing, tourism, health, technology, education and the creative arts.

Singapore prides itself on having become a modern state in less than four decades, compared to the three centuries taken by European nations and the United States. The state achieved modernity primarily because of its dedication to economic growth. This Singapore did through aggressive campaigns to create a national identity amongst its disparate and multicultural citizenry. Such campaigns included an emphasis on hard work and sacrifice of self for country to build a better future. Moreover, the Singapore government resolved to script a history that would unite Singaporeans while at the same time promoting the ruling party as the triumphant saviours in what is known as The Singapore Story (Hong & Huang 2008). The Singapore Story is the national story of Singapore whose name and narrative are derived from Lee Kuan Yew's epic 1998 memoir *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* and its sequel published in 2000 titled *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew, Vol. 2: From Third World to First: 1965-2000*.

The PAP has been successful at creating a mythology about itself and its successes in Singapore by selecting certain events and people in the years just prior to and immediately following independence in order to build a positive and glowing picture of its contributions to The Singapore Story. The Singapore Story and the PAP's part in it are made even more legitimate through the collection and the articulation of the living memories of Singaporeans who lived through the trauma and triumphs Singapore faced. For instance the Singapore government has been actively collecting the memories of Singaporeans through various projects run by the National Heritage Board's National Archives of Singapore. The Singapore Story is then packaged for future generations, particularly those born after 1965, as a constant reminder of what the government has done for Singapore and for Singaporeans. Furthermore, the contributions of other political players in The Singapore Story are either downplayed as insignificant (such as former First Minister David Marshall who was actively involved in negotiating with the British for self-government in the 1950s) or demonized as detractors and obstructers in the progress of the nation (such as veteran opposition figure J.B Jeyaretnam).

- ***An authoritarian government that plays a vital part in the development of Singapore's society and culture which is both lauded and despised by Singaporeans***

Singaporeans accord the PAP and Lee their due honours as architects of the nation who have built up a country and created a strong middle class. For instance, Singapore today is often in the international spotlight as a venue for world events such as the World Economic Forum and the Formula One Grand Prix. In addition Singapore boasts the greatest number of millionaires per household worldwide (Ng 2011).

Singapore's enormous successes in the economic sphere and status as a wealthy global city state are principally due to the PAP – the only ruling party to govern Singapore. One of the key founders of the PAP is elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew. Lee is credited as the founder of modern Singapore after serving the country as Prime Minister (1959-1990), Senior Minister (1990-2004) and Minister Mentor (2004-2011). Lee and the PAP have had absolute control in Singapore, thus ensuring a politically stable nation and a controlled workforce, which proved attractive to overseas investors and multinational companies that set up offices in the island state. Arguably, this control contributed to Singapore becoming a wealthy economic miracle despite being devoid of any natural resources other than its people. The current Prime Minister of Singapore is Lee's son Lee Hsien Loong.

To maintain order and control over the Singaporean people, the government embarked on long-running and highly effective education campaigns as part of its nation-building efforts. The emphasis of these campaigns in the early years of Singapore's independence was loyalty to state and self-sacrifice for the sake of community and country. Later on, the campaigns placed an emphasis on shared history and heritage, trust in the government and a life-long commitment to Singapore regardless of geographical boundaries. Through campaigns dedicated to nation building, the government also has created a citizenry that equate nation with government. This deep sense of commitment to and (over)reliance on government has meant that the authorities have been successful in controlling contemporary collective Singaporean culture and society. The Singapore 21 campaign is the latest large-scale campaign to instill national and social cohesion.

Singaporeans have always been reminded that Singapore's only resource is its people and the nation's continuing success will only be achieved through commitment to country and government. In 1997, then Prime Minister and current Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong explained that the Singapore 21 campaign is a 'vision for a new era', stating that the campaign

is about what the people of Singapore want to make of this country. More than a house, Singapore must be a home. The Government can provide the conditions for security and economic growth. But in the end, it is people who give feeling, the human touch, the sense of pride and achievement, the warmth. So beyond developing physical infrastructure and hardware, we need to develop our social infrastructure and software. In Sony Corporation, they call this 'heartware'. We need to go beyond economic and material needs, and reorient society to meet the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, cultural and social needs of our people...In future, the competitive advantage of nations will lie in their people – how a society is organised to maximise and mobilise the potential of its people, and how it serves the material, spiritual, intellectual, political, social and emotional needs of its citizenry. The ideas I have put forward are to develop a cohesive and resilient nation, a people fully equipped to compete in the future, and a people with emotional stakes in Singapore. (C.T. Goh 1997)

Embedded within the Singapore 21 campaign is the 'The Singapore Heartbeat' – the current project aimed at encouraging and reinforcing Singaporeans' commitment to nation and to the ruling party.

The Singapore Heartbeat

Singapore films, as I contend, do provide an insight into Singapore society and culture. They are the heartbeat of the nation, so to speak. The term 'Singapore Heartbeat' itself is one that is utilized by the Singapore government in order to drum up nationalist sentiments in its population which has grown weary of the ruling party and who are increasingly becoming transnational. The Singapore government (Singapore 21 2003) explains the purpose of 'Singapore Heartbeat':

As Singapore becomes more connected with other countries in the globalised economy, we must ensure that our national bonds do not grow weak.

Whether we live or work here or overseas, Singaporeans must develop a stronger sense of belonging to this country and embrace a common vision of the country as a home worth returning to and if need be, fighting and dying for.

We need to feel passionately about Singapore – that this is where our roots are and where our future lies. Some of us feel that this is home because we grew up here. For others, this island has become home because they have chosen to make it so. Whatever our origins may be, we are united by the common vision

of Singapore as our home. And only when all citizens share this common passion for the country will the Singapore heartbeat be strong.

The PAP's unwavering commitment to campaigns that instill strong feelings of loyalty to both nation and government has had its rewards. Arguably, such campaigns have resulted in the PAP maintaining power in Singapore. Moreover, a unique cultural trait of Singaporean nationalism is its allegiance to the PAP government (Barr & Skrbiš 2008). Yet this allegiance does not always work to the PAP's advantage.

It seems that while the vast majority of Singaporeans acknowledge the role played by the PAP in creating a safe and wealthy environment, they are simultaneously critical of the ruling party.¹⁷ While they take pride in Singapore's increasing profile in the global arena, they are also unhappy with some of the consequences of the nation's adoption of global capitalism. Many Singaporeans, however, are cautious about the forums that they use to critique the PAP. This is perhaps because the PAP is well known to 'punish' its critics by taking them through the local courts and successfully suing them for defamation as in the high profile case of J.B Jeyaretnam. Singaporeans thus critique the PAP in informal spaces and groups in what is colloquially known as 'coffee shop talk'. Increasingly, growing numbers of Singaporeans are turning to online platforms to discuss the PAP and the consequences of its policies. Social and political bloggers such as Au Waipang (1996) and satirist Lee Kin Mun (2012), who is more popularly known by his moniker 'mrbrown' (one of the first widely read bloggers in Singapore), run sites that provide unbridled commentary and satire on local society, culture and government. Meanwhile other popular political satire sites such as *TalkingCock* (2012) allow Singaporeans to contribute and consume irreverent articles on Singapore which indirectly refer to the government.

Most everyday Singaporeans, who heavily utilize online technology and identify themselves as netizens, make use of online forums to air their grievances while doing so anonymously, which has been noticed and commented upon by current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (2012). The forums on sites such as the news site *Asia One* (Singapore Press Holdings 2012) and popular political sites *The Online Citizen* (2012) and *TR Emeritus* (2012) (formerly known as *The Temasek Review Emeritus*) are well used by contributors and readers alike.¹⁸ Common topics of discussion pertaining to displeasure with the government have to do with the ruling PAP and everyday life in Singapore. Most Singaporeans get worked up about the elitism displayed by the PAP (KP Tan 2008b) and the very high salaries Cabinet Ministers and Members of Parliament (Mauzy 1997). Lifestyle and societal concerns with which many Singaporeans take issue include the high rates of immigration into the country which I will discuss in various sections of this book.

Singapore is changing. These changes are attributed to Singapore's growth towards a global city state, which has led to physical amendments in the landscape, ethnographic shifts in the population and an explosion of 'foreign' cultural practices. Many Singaporeans see the PAP as the cause for the dissonance they feel to the changes going on around them. This dissonance came to the forefront during the 2011 General Elections (GE).

Although Singaporeans tend to become more politically aware and active during election time, the 2011 GE was exceptional. The GE created a lot of fervent anti-PAP and pro-opposition party discussions online (e.g. *The Online Citizen* and *The Temasek Review*

Emeritus) and through social media (e.g. Facebook). These discussions revolved around certain issues that Singaporeans have become particularly concerned about:

- Increasing cost and standard of living created by the PAP through the influx of new permanent and temporary migrants
- increasing income gap levels and rising levels of poverty
- increasing number of foreigners who are changing the ethnographic and cultural landscapes of Singapore
- bullying and underhanded tactics by the PAP
- anger and disappointment at the PAP's creation of a materialistic, hierarchical and class-based society
- admiration for the tenacity of the opposition

The result was a loss of a Group Representative Constituency made up of 5 seats and a single seat constituency – the highest since the PAP swept into power in 1959. More importantly, the 2011 General Elections marked an unbridled political enthusiasm by the Singaporean electorate. Prominent Singaporean writer Catherine Lim wrote enthusiastically in her blog the day after the elections that she was pleasantly surprised at the way Singaporeans had evolved from political apathy to political consciousness. Since the GE, Singaporeans have been taking to social media to further comment about the state of Singapore as a result of government dictates. Such topics include the issues that dominated the GE as well as the mental and financial health of Singaporeans because of the presence of casinos and the abolition of the controversial Internal Security Act (ISA).¹⁹

Conclusion

Singapore is a country that supports a multicultural and multi-ethnic population with their own communal nuances based on tradition and religion which navigate cultural practices and rituals related to major life events such as death. These differences run deep in Singapore society, yet the vast majority of Singaporeans manage to unite and band together when confronted by common concerns that affect their everyday lives. The film industry manages to mirror and confront head on the issues that plague and disturb Singapore society, in a somewhat contemplative space. The following chapters will highlight Singapore films' incredible knack of capturing the struggles Singaporeans have negotiating ethnic cultural identity and uniting with each other because of communal differences while simultaneously coming together as a people when confronted with the presence of new migrants caused (in)directly by an omnipresent PAP government.

Chapter 2

Racial Harmony or Comedy of Errors? Ethnicity and the Singaporean Comedy

*We, the citizens of Singapore,
pledge ourselves as one united people,
regardless of race, language or religion,
to build a democratic society
based on justice and equality
so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and
progress for our nation*

‘The Singapore National Pledge’ (S. Rajaratnam 1966)

In his work on the representation of ethnicity in the Singapore media, Kenneth Paul Tan (2009) notes that Singaporeans generally do not have sustained face-to-face interactions with their ‘ethnic Other’. In other words, many Singaporeans do not have much contact or socialize with people outside their own immediate communal group. It is only through the media, Tan asserts, that Singaporeans encounter their ethnic Other. Television and film in Singapore have the responsibility of creating and maintaining positive notions of ethnicity, through both conventional and comedic stereotypes that serve to neutralize any paranoia Singaporeans have of perceived ethnic threats, as well as to visualize an imagined harmonious Singapore where all ethnicities live happily together. Currently the Singapore media features the three main ethnic groups in Singapore: the Chinese, the Malays and the Indians. While there are subtle differences between the terms ‘race’ and ‘ethnicity’ in scholarship – with the former implicating large groups of people united by appearance, culture and ethnicity in Singapore, the terms have been used interchangeably with each other. The more commonly used ‘race’ is used in official and unofficial discourse and is often employed to describe multiple ethnicities. For instance, the Indian race includes anyone of diasporic South Asian (e.g. India and Sri Lankan) heritage. Singapore’s use of the term ‘race’ is historical, borrowed from the British during their sojourn as imperial masters of the colony in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While I actively adopt the term ‘ethnicity’ in this chapter, I do acknowledge the spirited use of ‘race’ in Singapore, since it is very much part of the contemporary local lingo.

The issue of ethnic identity plagues Singapore society as a whole. While Singaporeans are immensely proud of their Chinese-Malay-Indian ethnic make-up for a variety of reasons – such as peaceful coexistence and hybridized cultural productions such as local food – this diversity nevertheless also creates superficial and conventional understandings of the ethnic Other. In other words, Singaporeans are happy to live in communal isolation as long as their ideas of the ethnic Other remain unchallenged. To this end, Singapore films do aid in maintaining and reinforcing predictable ethnic stereotypes. However, the conventional portrayal of ethnicities becomes muddled somehow when both film and television attempt to represent or deal with ethnicities that do not fit nicely into the Chinese-Malay-Indian nexus. While comedies worldwide sometimes make use of comedic portrayals of ethnicity to garner laughs, such portrayals in Singapore films is problematic and worth mentioning since mainstream comedies are produced and financed by government funded or co-owned companies such as Raintree Pictures. Portraying mixed ethnicities is a vexing issue in Singapore media as this chapter reveals.

Paradoxically, the visualization of an imagined multicultural Singapore also serves to maintain the demographic dominance of the ethnic Chinese as the principal demographic group in Singapore, since most locally made English-language films and television programmes are graced by ethnic Chinese faces. While the acting profession is no doubt blessed with an abundance of ethnic Chinese actors, it is not surprising that many protagonists in film and television shows are almost always ethnic Chinese. It is also not uncommon for non-Chinese actors to play ethnic Chinese characters. Supporting roles in film and television, however, are almost always the domain of other ethnicities.

Stereotyping of ethnicity for the benefit of multicultural harmony is arguably a beneficial move for a state-controlled media dedicated to maintaining and upholding the official multicultural discourse. Singaporean viewers become convinced of ethnic harmony in Singapore through the reinforcement of stereotypes they can recognize (K.P. Tan 2009). However, while it is easy to stereotype and thus identify the major ethnic groups in Singapore through appearance and language, the problem that many local viewers encounter is recognizing ethnicities outside the Chinese-Malay-Indian ethnic majorities, such as biracial and Eurasian fictional characters or performers. This chapter suggests that while Singapore is able to on the surface to maintain ethnic harmony in a country comprised of diverse ethnicities and cultures, the troubling use of actors of different ethnicities to play almost exclusively Chinese characters and the over-the-top portrayals of Eurasians are indicative of the challenges Singapore society has in dealing with ethnicity outside the Chinese-Malay-Indian nexus.

Local films – particularly comedies – have a tendency of reducing ethnicity to simplistic and non-threatening representations.¹ The representation of ethnicity seems to pose a predicament for Singapore cinema. Providing Singaporeans with formulaic, humorous and non-threatening representations of ethnicity that they are able to recognize and identify with is no doubt easier than presenting more complex yet potentially unrecognizable representations, particularly in commercial productions. To comprehend ethnicity in Singapore films, I take a look at the significance of ethnicity in Singapore and two popular English-language films featuring a multi-ethnic cast and characters: *Army Daze* (Ong 1996) and *One Leg Kicking* (Koh 2001). When Singapore does produce English-language films featuring multi-ethnic casts and characters, they often tend to be cringe worthy formulaic comedies which both these films represent.

It's Complicated – Multiculturalism in Singapore

Singapore prides itself on being a well-manicured multicultural society that has come a long way very quickly from the days of communal politics and violence that dominated the final years of British imperial rule and the difficult years of federation. It is now a nation that has seemingly formed a harmonious society that tolerates ethnic and religious difference (D.P.S. Goh 2008). Singaporeans have been brought up to believe that Singapore is a successful multicultural nation because there are no obvious signs of racism which for many other countries – take the form of race riots and racially motivated violence. Likewise, commentators (e.g. Chua 2003b) note that Singapore's version of multiculturalism is a form of social control. He (2003b: 76-77) explains that

[i]n Singapore, multiculturalism was adopted constitutionally at its founding. This has enabled the government to use ‘multiculturalism’ as an ideological basis for the rationalisation of policies and administrative practices on issues of race, ranging from macro-national language policies to micro-processes of allocation and the use of public spaces. The result is a series of ad hoc decisions that discriminate against different racial groups at different social structural and political junctures and historical times, that lack ethical/political consistency and that are rationalised under a substantively empty notion of ‘racial harmony’.

One way by which this social control is achieved is through official active remembering such as through museums (Gomes 2010).

In addition to the Indian, Malay and Chinese diasporic communities Singapore has minority ethnic communities such as the Eurasians, Arabs and Armenians (D.P.S. Goh 2008). This multicultural make-up stems from its history as a settler community.² British colonists in the early twentieth century recognized Singapore’s advantageous geographical position at the tip of the Malayan hinterland and between the East-West trading routes (Owen et al. 2005: 139-41). The British involved traders and indentured labourers from the region and elsewhere to develop Singapore into a global *entrepôt* that was highly cosmopolitan for its time. Traders from various regions of Asia and the Middle East visited Singapore and saw its potential for robust trade. The country attracted the attention of Western commerce eager for goods from the ‘Orient’ such as spices and silk. Indian and Chinese migrant labourers meanwhile had no trouble finding work in the thriving city, in areas such as infrastructure development and as hired hands facilitating the movement of goods traded at the mouth of the Singapore River (Owen 2005: 312-13). Most often, the traders and labourers were temporary migrants whose stay in Singapore was transitional. However, there were many factors that caused them to leave their own countries and make a new home in Singapore. They fled armed conflict, poverty and natural disasters to a place offering an abundance of work and a safer environment for entrepreneurship. This encouraged many transitional migrants to become permanent settlers.

It is not surprising to find that ethnicity increasingly dominates the hearts and minds of everyday Singaporeans. The undeniable presence of ethnicity is felt in the scripting of the nation’s history and identity (Hong & Huang 2008; Hong 2009). Ethnicity is also at the forefront of the government agenda, and the Singaporean psyche, in terms of official policies that govern housing, education and employment.

Multicultural Harmony

Singapore is indeed a multicultural and multi-ethnic nation, at least in the ways it brands itself internationally through its various tourism campaigns. Singapore is sold as a one-stop exotic destination of gastronomic, cultural and entertainment delights where visitors can sample Asia and indeed the world within a small yet safe space.³ The tourism campaigns that romanticize Singapore’s multi-ethnic diversity serve to drum up a sense of unity amongst Singaporeans in order to convince themselves of the success the nation has achieved as a non-homogeneous society (Heng & Devan 1995).

On the surface, the different ethnicities of Singapore live and work harmoniously with each other. The idea of racial harmony not only creates a peaceful space for citizens but national stability for the purpose of foreign investment. A nationally coherent workforce, after all, will be committed to building a wealthy and cosmopolitan Singapore, according to the government. There have not been any open communal conflicts or violent ethnic clashes in independent Singapore. The last racially charged incident took place on 21 July 1964, a year before Singapore's independence, when racial tensions between Chinese and Malays exploded on what is known today as the Prophet Muhammad Birthday Riots.

Since independence the Singapore government has spared no expense at making sure that there is racial harmony amongst its people. Racial harmony has endured in the independent nation in part because of the strict laws preventing racial incitement. Singapore Penal Code (Cap 224, 2008 Rev. Ed.), s. 298A states:

Whoever —

(a) by words, either spoken or written, or by signs or by visible representations or otherwise, knowingly promotes or attempts to promote, on grounds of religion or race, disharmony or feelings of enmity, hatred or ill-will between different religious or racial groups; or

(b) commits any act which he knows is prejudicial to the maintenance of harmony between different religious or racial groups and which disturbs or is likely to disturb the public tranquility,

shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 3 years, or with fine, or with both.

While these laws prevent open communal conflict from taking place, Singapore also puts in place soft approaches committed to promoting and fostering racial harmony. Singapore does this through: a national pledge stating unity despite communal differences, quoted at the beginning of this chapter; the promotion of racial harmony as part of country's tourism campaigns; the establishment of official think tanks such as the Inter-Racial and Religious Confidence Circle (IRCC); and the establishment of racial harmony through the formal education system, in particular in social studies texts. In 2008, Singapore launched Racial Harmony Day, which is commemorated in schools on the anniversary of the 1964 Prophet Muhammad Birthday Riots, with children wearing traditional ethnic dress such as the Chinese *cheongsam*, the Malay *baju kurong* and the Indian sari to school.

Not Quite Integration: Cultural Harmony without the 'Multi' Bit

Although Singapore supports a multicultural and multi-ethnic population, the government purposefully chooses elements of Chinese cultural values as the template for a common Singaporean national identity (Gomes 2010: 299-301). This engineered national identity is arguably strategic, since Singapore's biggest demographic are the ethnic Han Chinese whose ancestors migrated from southern China during British rule. The ruling People's Action Party (PAP), fronted by Lee Kuan Yew, openly encourages and supports the strength of Confucian Chinese values as a model for Singapore and its people, since selected elements support unquestioning obedience to government, hard work and self-sacrifice – the very features Singapore has desired in its people to take it from developing to developed nation status. The template, at least on the surface, has the intended effect of maintaining a shared Singaporean

identity amongst a population of people from different ethnic groups; however, this only appears to work because the Chinese dominate in terms of population and cultural influence. Below the surface, however, the ethnic Chinese also grapple with the changes their culture and identity have endured for the sake of the nation state (Chua 2009), which was discussed in depth in Chapter 3 in the context of the films of Tan Pin Pin.

While the government constantly reminds its people that Singapore supports a happy and tolerant multicultural society, the state also discourages cross-fertilisation of ethnicities and cultures by advocating cultural pride through non-political displays of cultural signifiers, such as festivals and food as well as through communal self-support. Communal self-support takes the form of what is known in Singapore as community ‘self-help groups’.

There are five self-help groups that exist in Singapore: Council for the Development of Singapore (CDC); Yayasan MENDAKI, for the Muslim Malay community; Chinese Development Assistance Council (CDAC), for the Chinese community; Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA), for the Indian community; and the Eurasian Association (EA), for the Eurasian community. Self-help groups have the responsibility of servicing their own ethnic community and for addressing any communal problems that may arise in the community. Self-help groups also provide social and education schemes, such as cooking classes and scholarships, for students in the Singapore education system from primary to university level. These groups also, within reason and along government-sanctioned lines, take on an advocacy role in terms of voicing the concerns of their respective communities. Advocacy here does not involve any issues that would incite racial tensions, such as criticism of other ethnicities or complaints regarding racial inequality.

At the school level, the government requires that Singaporean children are only allowed to study a ‘second language’, known as mother tongue – their ‘first language’ being English –, which their race assigns them to. Second language’ or ‘mother tongue’ is a compulsory subject in the local school system and pupils are forced to stick with their chosen second language from primary school right up to high school. So if a student is ethnic Chinese, then they are only allowed to take up Mandarin as their second language. Non-ethnic Chinese pupils such as Indians and Malays are encouraged to take up their mother tongue as their second language, although they have the option of opting for Mandarin instead. Eurasian pupils, however, have a choice of languages, often preferring either Malay or Mandarin since their mother tongue is mostly English. However, certain education practices in Singapore that are tied in with Chinese culture and language blatantly favour the ethnic Chinese over and above the other races. While English is the language of choice in the civil service and the schooling system, Mandarin is held up as a significant and arguably superior language. Some of the most highly regarded elite secondary schools in Singapore, for instance, are part of an education scheme known as the Special Assistance Plan (SAP). Students who enter into SAP schools have excellent results, particularly in Mandarin. However, SAP schools are gated education institutions that only students who excel in Mandarin can enter, and almost always these students are ethnic Chinese.

Singapore’s form of multiculturalism thus means that Singaporeans are first and foremost able to identify the three primary communal groups in Singapore. Singaporeans are generally aware, on a superficial level, of their ethnic Other as long as they fall into the recognizable Chinese, Indian and Malay ethnic and cultural categories. As Norman Vasu (2012) observes,

this is because of the government's management of multiculturalism in Singapore. Vasu (2012: 738) explains:

The management of Singapore's multicultural composition displays a deeply entrenched belief in the importance of communal identity and the need for the state to both protect and preserve inter-group differences. Besides administrative enforcement of the racial categories, the state has also essentialized interracial cultural identities by tagging each race with "unique" cultural traits. Races can be considered essentialized through Singaporean multiculturalism: each race is invested with cultural traits such as language and dress derived from the cultural hotchpotch of their group's history and held to be unique to them and distinct from others. Moreover, these cultural traits are held to be permanent and passed down through the generations.

So while Singaporeans feel a sense of great national pride in their multicultural identity, many Singaporeans, as asserted at the beginning of this chapter, have a high tendency to have sustained relationships primarily with members of their own broad communal groupings. This lack of integration, arguably, has perhaps resulted in many Singaporeans having very little understanding of ethnicities and cultures other than their own.

The groups of Singaporeans who perhaps pose the greatest challenge for locals to recognize and identify are those that fall outside the CMI nexus. Here I refer to Singaporeans who are classified as Eurasian, and the first-generation offspring of mixed racial couplings. The Eurasians are the biggest minority group in Singapore and the best-known 'Other' in the CMIO racial categorization. With that said, Singaporeans may find it difficult to even recognize Eurasians since they vary in appearance such as in skin colour and have surnames that originate from a number of European heritages. While 'established' Eurasians have an official classification in Singapore, first-generation offspring of mixed unions do not have that luxury. Until 2010, the offspring of mixed parentage were 'assigned' an ethnic grouping by default based on the ethnicity of the father in official documents such as birth certificates and National Registration Identification Cards (NRIC) (Daniels 2005; Hoe 2010). Now, biracial children are able to have the ethnicities of both parents listed in official documents with the father's ethnicity accorded primary status (Hoe 2010). So the offspring of a Chinese father and Indian mother will be classified as a Chinese-Indian. At the time of writing, the impact of this change particularly in terms of self-identity, belonging and social relations in Singapore society are still yet to be seen.

Singapore and its people indeed struggle with how to understand and negotiate ethnicities outside the Chinese-Malay-Indian nexus. So does Singapore's films.

Stereotypes Galore: English-Language Comedies and the Multi-ethnic Cast of Characters

While Singapore cinema now tends to feature films that are in the most commonly spoken Chinese languages (Mandarin, Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese), with entire casts of Chinese characters and actors, the local film industry does sometimes produce English-language films with multi-ethnic casts of characters and actors. Malay-language films were once the staple of the local film making industry from the 1940s to the 1960s, however, non-Chinese and non-

English films are now a rarity, with Eric Khoo's Tamil-language *My Magic* (2008) being the best-known commercially screened film since the rejuvenation of Singapore's film industry in the early 1990s. English-language films however are often comedies featuring multi-ethnic casts and characters such as *Army Daze* and *One Leg Kicking*. While the lead characters are likable and often everyday Singaporeans – or as I described in Chapter 1, the Everyman whose concerns are represented and expressed in film – they are, as I suggest here, sometimes also portrayed as conventional ethnic stereotypes.

Army Daze is a whimsical comedy about the national service experiences of a group of new recruits during their basic military training (BMT) stint in the Singapore army. Singapore practises conscription where all male citizens and permanent residents are called up for national service once they reach the age of nineteen (sixteen for those not completing any post-secondary education and twenty for those completing a polytechnic diploma). While BMT lasts for three months, recruits – known as Operationally-Ready National Servicemen (NSmen) – are then seconded to units to serve out their two-year national service with either in the Singapore Armed Forces (SAF), Singapore Police Force (SPF), or the Singapore Civil Defence Force (SCDF). Once the two-year stint is over, these young men become reservists until the age of 40 for enlisted men and 50 for officers. While only the males in Singapore are conscripted into national service, it is an experience that affects all families, friends and loved ones in some way or the other. The significance of community support for National Servicemen (NSmen) can be seen in education programmes aimed at female secondary students, for instance. The government organizes secondary school visits to army camps for the purpose of informing school-going teenage girls of the duty menfolk such as brothers, (future) boyfriends and male friends have to the nation. Young girls are told that their primary duty to the nation is to be supportive of these young men as their service to the nation. For the vast majority, national service, particularly BMT, is the first time that young male Singaporeans are separated from their families for a substantial period of time. This is because BMT involves staying in-camp 6 days a week. Separation anxiety and worry are common for families, friends and loved ones on the outside.

The film, based loosely on playwright Michael Chiang's BMT experiences, was initially a successful 1987 theatre production. The film hit cinemas at a time when Singapore's film industry was starting to churn out more productions due to government interest and support. *Army Daze* was produced by Cathay Asia Films at a cost of SGD\$700,000 and made a profit, with local box office takings reaching SGD\$1.6 million. One of the most successful locally made films of its time, *Army Daze*'s popularity could well be in response to the comedic portrayal of an experience that many Singaporeans are well accustomed to yet apprehensive about.

One Leg Kicking is a football comedy that follows a group of misfits led by Tai Po (Gurmit Singh) who come together to form a team which results in them eventually winning a local league competition. Reminiscent of Stephen Chow's brilliant and unforgettable *Shaolin Soccer* (Chow 2001), *One Leg Kicking* is a feel-good film that features formulaic good versus bad, and poor versus rich themes. While international audiences might find *One Leg Kicking* difficult to follow and somewhat alien because of its disjointed narrative and mixture of languages (Singapore English and Chinese dialects), local audiences responded incredibly well. Opening on a public holiday, the film grossed SGD\$111,973 – the highest ever box office takings for any local film at the time – and received positive local press reviews (Scott 2001).

Often featuring over-the-top acting performances, these films unashamedly echo state-sanctioned multiculturalism, with themes of communal harmony and homogeneity through a recognizable Singaporean national identity officially dictated by the Singapore Shared Values (Gomes 2010).⁴ While these films include people from the various broad Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian ethnic communities, they also awkwardly base their humour on embarrassing ethnic stereotypes. Ethnic stereotyping is alive and well in Singapore. Growing up in Singapore I used to hear conventional positive and negative ideas about the prominent communal groups in Singapore include the Chinese as hard-working yet rude money-minded businessmen, the Indians as good talkers yet treacherous alcoholic wife-beaters, the Malays as friendly yet lazy and complacent, and the Eurasians as good time Charlies who are good looking entertainers who have difficulty with academic study. With a growing non-Singaporean born population, some Singaporeans I talk to have classified Caucasians as professionals but with loose values, while reading online commentary about mainland Chinese classify them as vulgar, uncouth and are unable to assimilate into Singaporean society partly because of the perceived notion that they do not want to communicate in English. Online comments on new migrants to Singapore which will be dealt with in depth later in this book, also accuse South Asians as being disloyal to Singapore, leaving when something better arises in another country. Conventional portrayals of ethnicity in Singaporean comedies are thus something that home-grown audiences are able to respond to and identify with.

Siva Choy's Indian-Singaporean character Sammy Best in *One Leg Kicking*, for example, is always drunk on toddy (Indian homemade liquor made from coconut) while Ahamed Asad's character Krishnamoorthy and his on-screen girlfriend Lathi (Jacintha Charles) in *Army Daze* are obsessed with Bollywood musicals. Whenever together in the *Army Daze*, lovebirds Krishnamoorthy and Lathi perform Bollywood-like song and dance numbers. Meanwhile 'Eurasians' Kenny Pereira (*Army Daze*) and Vernon (*One Leg Kicking*), played by Kevin Mark Marghese and Moe Alkaff respectively, are portrayed as incredibly effeminate. The ethnic Chinese meanwhile are categorized into two groups: the English-educated and the Chinese-educated. The wealthy English-speaking educated middle or upper-class Chinese are portrayed as arrogant and selfish, or naive and silly. The Chinese-educated on the other hand speak the Chinese dialect of Hokkien and Singapore English (Singlish). They are portrayed as rough around the edges yet kind-hearted heartlanders commonly known as Ah Bengs (masculine) and Ah Lians (feminine).

In his work on depictions of ethnicity in Singapore, K.P. Tan (2009) observes that the moving picture landscape is marked overwhelmingly by ethnic stereotypes that help attract audiences well-versed in conventional notions of ethnicity in Singapore. Tan's comprehensive overview of ethnic stereotyping in the local film and television landscape articulates that while audiences identify with these stereotypes in order to enjoy the productions, they do so as a way of coping with their anxieties about their ethnic Other. These anxieties are supported, if not instigated by Singapore's scripted history, which highlights communal violence as a threat to Singapore's stability (Hong & Huang 2008). The villains of this communal violence are primarily the ethnic Malays (Gomes 2010). In Tan's words:

[I locate] within popular film and television the ethnic stereotypes that implicitly inform multiracial policies and which are in turn reproduced by the coupling of commercial demands with the monomaniacal and rigid pursuit of national security. In other words, stereotypes on film and television are supplied to audiences who demand an immediately gratifying means of helping them deal

with the perceived ethnic threats, more recently foregrounded by popular historical accounts of ethnic hostilities in Singapore. These accounts have come to constitute a large part of the official material for “National Education” in schools and the wider public. (2009: 289)

So while Singapore prides itself on its multicultural make-up, for many Singaporeans, encountering their ethnic Other is limited to film and television presentations rather than sustained face-to-face encounters (K.P. Tan 2009: 290). Tan suggests that local cinema and television provide a space for encountering the ethnic Other but in a hypothetical happy place, so any anxiety over perceived ‘ethnic threats’ will be peacefully resolved. As K.P. Tan eloquently puts it: ‘[P]eople would much prefer to deal with stereotypes that reduce complexity, devalue those who are different and therefore threatening, and glorify themselves and their own community’ (2009: 290). An excellent example of the moving image providing a safe and happy space that depicts communal harmony is the film *Army Daze*.

Serving as a metaphor for an imagined multicultural Singapore, *Army Daze* humorously follows a group of new recruits as they embark on the journey of national service together. Indian Krishnamoorthy, Malay Johari Salleh, Chinese Teo Ah Beng (Adrian Lim) and Malcolm Png (Edward Yong) together with Eurasian Kenny Pereira represent the different ethnic groups in Singapore who come together in a neutral space and shared Singaporean experience – national service. National service in Singapore serves not only to create a citizenry who are both operationally trained and combat ready, but to foster nation building through a shared purpose – the defence of a nation. Conscription in Singapore, in other words, serves as a tool for propagating community relations in a nation with ethnic diversity.

The film highlights these five NSmen’s reliance on each other and the development of camaraderie within the group despite their ethnic differences. For example, this bond of interdependence is reflected when Krishnamoorthy leaves for a period of time because of an injury, which results in the group falling apart. They also function like a makeshift family by mimicking the iconic final scene of the American family television series *The Waltons* by wishing each other goodnight at bedtime; and the recruits live as equals as they sleep in the same dormitory together. The creation of camaraderie through national service has indeed met with success. The national service experience is a life highlight in the lives of Singaporean men, with many forging long-running friendships with platoon mates. Social media such as Facebook has become a platform for remembering the national service experience as a time of great camaraderie, with Singaporean men reuniting and sharing fond memories with their former platoon mates. For instance, many Singaporean men have exhibitions of photographs documenting their time in national service. Differences are put aside for homogeneity – their individuality is stamped out when they are fashioned to look like each other through hairstyle (crew cut) and dress (army fatigues), while community identity is developed through the common experience of basic military training.

While the film paints a picture of multicultural harmony, there are pockets where this ‘harmony’ is questioned. For instance, when Mrs Png (Margaret Chan) finally catches up with her son, she comments about how ‘black’ he has become because of his time in the sun. Later, Ah Beng introduces his sister Ah Huay (Eileen Wee) to Krishnamoorthy and his girlfriend Lathi. Ah Huay looks visibly uncomfortable in their presence. Moreover, disparity based on socio-economic backgrounds is also clearly put aside. Class discrepancy is demonstrated by

the English-educated and wealthy yet naive Malcolm Png, the film's narrator, and the crude Chinese-educated heartlander Teo Ah Beng. The difference in the way Malcolm and Ah Beng speak become obvious signifiers of their class differences, with Malcolm speaking 'Queen's English' while Ah Beng communicates in heavily accented Singlish. The message conveyed is that national service is not only colour blind but also class blind.

While ethnic stereotyping in the media is part of a bigger national strategy on communal harmony, could such stereotyping be an indicator of something less innocuous? Could ethnic stereotyping in Singaporean comedies and the popularity of conventional portrayals of ethnicity instead be indicators of perhaps a lack of both communal interest and understanding between ethnicities in 'multicultural' Singapore? As Tan observes, the film provides

the opportunity to use popular culture as an engagingly 'hypothetical' medium to explore and learn about complex ethnic identities and relations in more sophisticated and problematic terms, that is to say, the real potential for social and cultural vibrancy, is wasted. (K.P. Tan 2009: 290)

While I agree with Tan that Singaporean comedies neglect to use the opportunity 'to explore and learn about complex ethnic identities and relations in more sophisticated and problematic terms', doing so provides an indication at how Singapore, although officially supporting a multicultural society, has trouble with ethnicity outside the Chinese-Malay-Indian nexus. Ethnic diversity and identity thus are over-simplified in *One Leg Kicking*'s use of a biracial actor – Gurmit Singh, whose father is Punjabi Indian and mother is Japanese-Chinese to play ethnic Chinese protagonist, Taipo; and the over-the-top cringeworthy depiction of Eurasians in both *One Leg Kicking* and *Army Daze*. Rather than allowing Singh to play a biracial character and thus explore, if not acknowledge another level of multiculturalism – people of mixed ethnicity – he is assigned to portray a Chinese person, something which he has made a career of. Likewise, both films find it challenging to depict Eurasians in a sophisticated manner. Instead, *Army Daze* and *One Leg Kicking* resort to exaggeration and absurdity by portraying male Eurasians as hyper-feminine and/or ridiculously outlandish caricatures. Behind the erasure of Singh's biracial background and the bizarre representation of Eurasians lies the subliminal reflection of the paradoxical lack of ethnic comprehension in a nation that prides itself on its multicultural make-up.

Hard to Categorize: The Ethnic Confusion of Gurmit Singh

Gurmit Singh is one of Singapore's best-known local celebrities. Starting out in theatre when he was seventeen playing St Francis of Assisi in the locally written Catholic play *Poverello* (P. Goh 1986), Singh has since had a stellar career in both cinema and television (Lyndley 2006). Besides *One Leg Kicking*, he has played the lead in other locally made popular English-language films such as *Just Follow Law*. Singh often, if not always, plays the hard-working and responsible Singaporean-Chinese heartlander who is a loving father and a loyal friend. In his silver screen personas, Singh is often a widower who works hard in order to make a better life for himself and his children. He is never despondent, despite not being rich, and has a heart of gold. Singh has also been compère on numerous high-profile variety shows for Singapore's only free-to-air television broadcaster MediaCorp, such as *Singapore Idol* (2004, 2006 and 2009) and government-sponsored national events such as the Singapore National Day Parade (1996-97, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2005-6). However, it is the cringeworthy, Singlish-

spewing, yellow-wellington-boots-wearing Phua Chu Kang with his permed hair and raisin for a mole that Singh is perhaps best known for.

Phua Chu Kang is the lovable but crude building contractor in the multi-Asian Television Award winning television sitcom *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd (PCK Ltd)*. Phua Chu Kang has been a polarizing figure. Some Singaporeans experience cultural cringe when confronted with his appearance and his Singlish, while others are fond of him for the very same reasons.⁵ Despite this Phua Chu Kang was chosen to be the ‘symbol’ of Singapore in the internationally watched reality show *The Amazing Race (US)* in 2002. He was also the light-hearted spokesperson for the government when SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) hit the nation in 2003, appearing in a music video instructing Singaporeans on best hygiene practices in order to contain the spread of the virus. In 2010 Singh starred as the eponymous hero in *Phua Chu Kang: The Movie* (Boo 2010). Since the first Singapore Day in 2007 – an event organized by the government’s Overseas Singaporean Unit that takes place in cities with high concentrations of expatriate Singaporeans in order to inform and entice them back to the homeland – Singh has donned his famous yellow boots and appeared together with the rest of the cast of *PCK Pte Ltd*, to the delight and pleasure of Singaporeans attending the event (Gomes 2009).

Besides playing the Italian St Francis of Assisi and a Japanese sumo wrestler in the Malaysian comedy *Sumolah/Let’s Sumo!* (Shauki 2007), Singh’s Singapore-based acting roles have mostly been less ethnically diverse, since he almost always plays an ethnic Chinese. Singh has also appeared in Chinese-language variety shows and has spoken Mandarin in public arenas, particularly when hosting major events that are telecast on nation-wide television. While Chinese dialects are widely spoken in Singapore, they are never used in mainstream broadcast media, particularly in radio and television. Rather it is Mandarin that is the vernacular chosen by the government that is heard on MediaCorp, the official radio and television broadcaster in Singapore. In 2009, for instance, Singh co-hosted the Chinese-language variety show *City Beat* with well-known Mandarin-speaking actors Bryan Wong and Kym Ng, together with bilingual actor Adrian Pang. In his personal life, Singh’s wife is ethnic Chinese and Singh has been actively learning Mandarin. His study of Mandarin has also made him the poster boy for Singapore’s Speak Mandarin Campaign. An interview about his journey learning Mandarin appears on the Speak Mandarin Campaign website (Promote Mandarin Council 2010).

On one level it is understandable that ethnic Chinese fictional protagonists in both film and television dominate, as this reflects Singapore demographics. However, on another level the frequent casting of Singh in ethnic Chinese roles raises questions regarding the representation of non-ethnic figures outside of the dominant demographic group. And Singh is not the only non-Chinese actor to play an ethnic Chinese on television. Eurasian actress Vernetta Lopez became famous for playing Denise Tan, the daughter of patriarch Tan Ah Teck in the hugely popular and long-running English-language sitcom *Under One Roof* (Teo et al. 1995-2003).

While Singh may be typecast within a certain ethnic framework, this has been done so that his characters are more identifiable and accessible to local audiences. Chinese-Singaporeans make up more than three quarters of the population and are able to identify with ethnic Chinese characters in locally made film productions more so than they would with any other ethnic groups. In cinema, it is the Chinese-language films that are the financial successes because of the ethnic make-up of the audience. Local popular culture seems to have decided that if Singh

played anyone other than a Chinese character, audiences might become confused. The local media has not seized the opportunity to present the richness of multiculturalism that go beyond static representations of the communal groups within the CMIO classification. Singh's on-screen Chinese persona and the erasure of his biracial identity could well be indicative of the ease local cinema has mimicking the demographic and cultural dominance of the ethnic Chinese, despite Singapore's national branding as a multicultural society.



Figure 2.1: Still of Gurmit Singh as the hardworking ethnic Chinese family man Tai Po in *One Leg Kicking*. From the DVD version of the film (Zhao Wei Films, Singapore Film Commission, MediaCorp Studios and Raintree Pictures 2001).

It is not difficult for Singaporeans to read Singapore as an essentially 'Chinese society', as the government has spent much time and effort in carving out a national history underscored by Chineseness (as represented by people, identity and culture). The scripted history of *The Singapore Story* points to the role Chinese migrants played in Singapore's development as an *entrepôt* trading centre. The National Museum of Singapore, the Chinese Heritage Centre and

to a lesser extent the Asian Civilisations Museum, commemorate the economic, social and political contributions of the Chinese in colonial Singapore. According to *The Singapore Story* it is the Chinese more than others who played significant roles as agents of trade during the colonial period. Moreover, it is the Chinese who are now the key players in Singapore's political and economic scenes, with Lee Kuan Yew as the primary mover of modern Singapore. The Singapore government readily refers to the qualities the Chinese possess as leaders of Singapore while casting doubt on the non-Chinese in this regard. The question of whether the city state was ready for a non-Chinese prime minister came up in 2008 when the United States of America elected its first African-American president, Barack Obama. At the time, the government reiterated that Singapore may not as yet be ready for a non-Chinese prime minister.

The erasure of biracial identity on-screen in favour of the dominant Chinese ethnic and cultural national discourses is not the only disquieting aspect of Singapore cinema. The humorous yet puzzling representation of Eurasians as generally effeminate gay men or silly buffoons also begs to be addressed.

The Fashion Victim Lounge Singer and the Petite Bitchy Housewife: Singapore Cinema's Humorous yet Troubling Portrayal of Eurasians

The concept of 'Eurasian' as an ethnic group poses a challenge to Singaporean ethnic and cultural identity, principally amongst Singaporeans themselves. The dominant racial and cultural group in Singapore is the Chinese, with 74.1 per cent of Singapore's population identifying themselves as Chinese. The next group are the Malays with 13.4 per cent, followed by then by the Indians with 9.2 per cent. Eurasians make up only 0.014 per cent of Singapore's resident population (US Centre for World Mission n.d.) and are a minority race under the umbrella term of 'Others'. So Eurasians are not just figuratively Otherized but are also classified as such. However, Singapore Eurasians are dedicated to communal identity and community belonging in Singapore. In 1994, they successfully campaigned for the Eurasian Association (EA) to become a community self-help group. The EA has become the peak body representing Eurasian interests and the only official organization responsible for fostering community spirit and maintaining Eurasian culture.

Eurasians in Singapore trace their lineage to the European colonisers that populated South East Asia from the fifteenth century, with the coming of the Portuguese and the Spaniards, to the height of British-Dutch-German imperial dominance of the region in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, while Eurasian is a term coined by the British, circa 1849 (Pereira 2007), to recognize and classify children of interracial couplings, the term became more than just a categorization but an ethnic and a (trans)cultural identity in itself. Generations of descendants of the European (male) colonizers and the Asian (female) colonized collectively identified themselves as Eurasian in both Singapore and Malaysia with a distinguishable cultural identity based on Catholicism.

The largest group of descendants of European-Asian couplings along these lines are the progeny of the Portuguese sailors who settled in Malacca during the height of Portuguese naval dominance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. These descendants are sometimes known as 'Kristang'. Kristang is the Eurasian ethnic and cultural identity most familiar to Singaporeans and given the imprimatur as the official Eurasian culture by the government. The EA helps to

promote and maintain Kristang culture through various programmes and schemes, one of which is the annual appearance of the popular Eurasian contingent, dressed in Kristang cultural dress, at the Singapore National Day Parade on 9 August. Here the contingent performs the *jingli nona*, a folk dance commonly associated with Kristang Eurasians. Eurasians in Singapore, however, are still a novelty precisely because they do not fall neatly in Singapore's simplification of the ethnic categories, which are strongly linked to ethnic appearance and Singapore-centric behaviour that is linked to loyalty to nation.

Sometimes it is hard to spot Eurasians in Singapore. They do not look Chinese, Malay, Indian, or even Caucasian. Eurasians as an ethnic collective thus may pose a challenge to fellow Singaporeans because the different versions of their mixed ethnic appearance do not easily fall into the recognisable Chinese-Malay-Indian nexus.⁶ Depending on their ethnic heritage, Eurasians may be fair skinned, olive skinned, dark skinned or some variation of these. Not being able to be easily recognized and therefore blend into the CMI ethnic landscape can be unnerving. Many Eurasians have struggled with blending into Singapore and have emigrated to Australia, particularly the city of Perth in Western Australia.⁷ Since Australia abandoned its White Australia Policy in 1973 there has been a steady stream of Eurasians emigrating to Perth because they felt they had no place in multicultural Singapore.⁸ *Army Daze*'s Kenny refers to the Eurasian exodus to Perth when he admits that his parents have emigrated there.

This trepidation about an inability to recognize and classify people into the CMI categories is evident in the way the way that Eurasians – who are a rarity in Singapore cinema – are portrayed on the big screen. Unease about who or what Eurasians are is exemplified in *One Leg Kicking*, in particular in the character of Vernon – a popular name for Eurasians born in the years immediately before and after World War II. In order to identify Eurasians, Singapore cinema often turns to using typically degrading local notions of this communal group. Vernon, played by Arab-Singaporean Moe Alkaff, is overweight and looks like a fashion victim wearing colourful shirts and flared trousers reminiscent of the 1970s. In one scene he dons Michael Jackson's famous red drummer-boy outfit with the trademark single white glove. It is easier, in other words, to portray Eurasians within humorous yet stereotypical frameworks, rather than unpack the complexity of this ethnic group. Eurasians after all can be stereotyped as adopting over-the-top American-centric fashion such as cowboy outfits, inclusive of the loud shirts, knee-high boot, spurs and rodeo-inspired hat.

In the film, Vernon has aspirations of being a professional singer. He even has a band called Vernon and the Vibrations. Here the film draws on conventional ideas of Eurasian occupations, as their involvement in musical entertainment was a common sight in both colonial and postcolonial Singapore. Some of Singapore's most famous veteran singers include 1960s heart-throb Vernon Cornelius, who was known as Singapore's Cliff Richard, rock and rollers Mel and Joe Ferdinands, who have been in the music industry for more than forty years, and internationally renowned jazz musician Jeremy Monteiro. *One Leg Kicking*'s Vernon, unfortunately, is a terrible singer whose performances on stage are cringeworthy.



Figure 2.2: Still of Moe Alkaff as lounge singer Vernon in *One Leg Kicking*. From the DVD version of the film (Zhao Wei Films, Singapore Film Commission, MediaCorp Studios and Raintree Pictures 2001).

While Vernon is constructed as a kind and loyal friend to Tai Po, he is also portrayed as an embarrassing and useless buffoon. Vernon is seen walking into doors and is often the reason their football team loses matches. His lack of prospects, talent, style and a real job seem to define his (Eurasian) character. Vernon angrily responds to negative criticism of his singing by stating: 'I am a professional singer, okay! I get paid for this singing, you know or not. I have never had a day job before in my entire life!' Still Vernon is also chastized by his authoritative father (Mark Richmond) for being lazy and useless as he chases his pipe dream of becoming a successful singer. At the end of the *One Leg Kicking* Vernon eventually finds success as a singer, but not in Singapore. Vernon becomes a lounge singer in Las Vegas.

Perhaps the most prominent home-grown Eurasian character to ever grace local cinema in Singapore is *Army Daze*'s new recruit Kenny Pereira, played with effeminate affectation by Kevin Mark Marghese.⁹ Kenny is the only Eurasian recruit in a multi-ethnic ensemble cast of characters representative of the major communal groups in Singapore. The humour surrounding Kenny is in his effeminate mannerisms and his dream of becoming 'a housewife in Hougang' (Hougang is a HDB housing estate). Kenny's effeminate characteristics contrast starkly with displays of Asian heterosexual masculinity portrayed by the other characters. Kenny stands out from the crowd since he walks with exaggerated hip movements and with his limp wrist in the air. 'Limp wrist syndrome' is a derogatory phrase in Singapore referring to homosexuality.

Kenny is an over-the-top presentation of the hyper-feminized homosexual, which audiences laugh at rather than laugh with. He takes on hyperbolic female traits by being the most sensitive and emotional in the group of recruits. He is also the bitchiest and the most concerned about his looks. In one scene, he enters the parade ground with a cosmetic face mask, while in another scene he catwalks into the bathroom with his head wrapped in a towel, carrying a basketful of body cleansing and moisturising products. While his effeminate nature is accepted with good humour by the rest of the platoon, Malcolm Png the English-educated well off Chinese recruit looks incredibly uncomfortable when Kenny mildly flirts with him. The only reference to Kenny's 'masculinity' is his ability to outshine his platoon mates in an obstacle course.

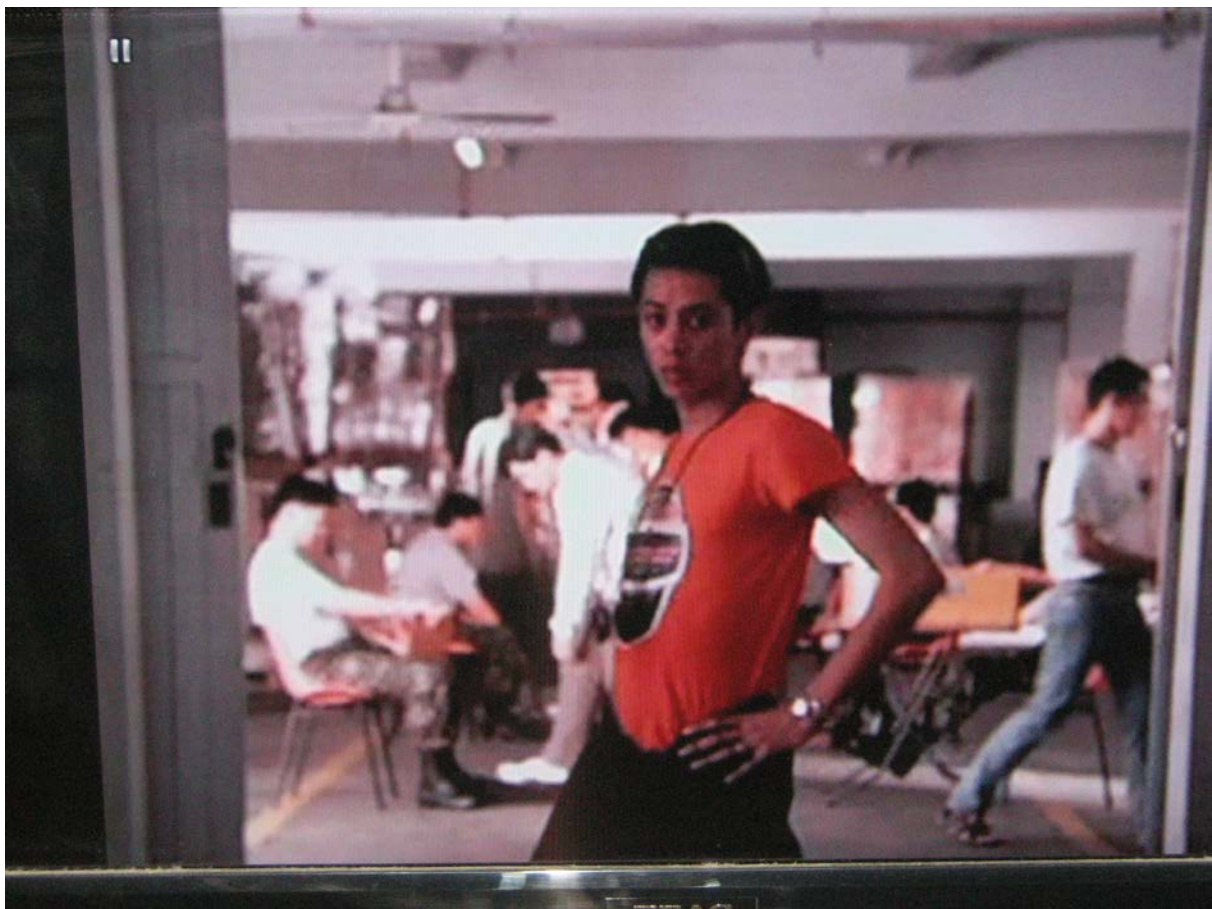


Figure 2.3: Still of effeminate Kenny posing in *Army Daze*. From the DVD version of the film (Cathay Organisation and Warner Home Video n.y.)

It is easier for Singapore cinema to make the Eurasian, rather than any other ethnic figure, gay. The effeminate gay after all presents sexual ambiguity that might confuse and challenge conformist ideals of manhood established by the cultural and religious teachings of other more dominant ethnic groups. Portraying ethnic Malays as effeminate, for instance, may be too much of a political hotbed since Singapore is in the middle of the mostly Muslim Malay Archipelago. Familiar media representations of ethnic Indians through the Bollywood film industry meanwhile portray its male heroes and villains as hyper-masculinized individuals. Analysis of Singaporean masculinity (Hudson 2006; Pugsley 2007) reveals that the ideal

Singapore man is based on the traits exhibited by Singapore's elder statesman and founder Lee Kuan Yew. Singaporean masculinity, in other words, is defined by the power, intelligence and determination exhibited by Lee. In the characters of Kenny and Vernon the Eurasian ethnicity becomes the antithesis of the ideal Singaporean male, and thus an object of ridicule.¹⁰

Caricatures of stereotypical Eurasians, both Kenny and Vernon are no doubt the most interesting figures, in their respective films, due in most part to Marghese's and Alkaff's exaggerated acting. They are being absurd yet entertaining characters who find it difficult to make a place for themselves in Singapore. Unlike the go-getting ideal Singaporean who is hardworking, industrious, ambitious, successful and of course, Chinese, Eurasians have become the epitome of the Singaporean who cannot succeed in fast-paced Singapore – so much so that they have to go overseas to make a life for themselves. Kenny's parents, and eventually Kenny, choose to live in the slower-paced Perth, while Vernon goes to the most kitsch and over-the-top American city – Vegas. The dream of leaving Singapore for Perth as a mark of success is not only the Eurasian but the ultimate Singaporean dream according to Djinn's *Perth* (2004). While Singaporeans are generally loyal to Singapore, they are ambivalent about whether this loyalty means physically staying in Singapore.

According to its government, Singapore equates loyalty to nation with the physical presence of its people. Singaporeans who remain in the country are known as 'stayers', while those who leave to become permanent residents and citizens elsewhere are known as 'quitters'. In order to drum up nationalist sentiments, Singaporean leaders often refer to stayers and quitters in their National Day speeches (e.g. Goh 2002). The reason for these labels stems from a fear that Singapore has of its qualified and professional citizens abandoning the country for greener pastures overseas. Singapore has always framed itself as a nation dependent on its people as its only resource. With an increasing 'brain drain' of university-educated professionals leaving Singapore for major destinations such as Australia, Canada, the US and the UK, the government has commended Singaporean stayers as loyal upholders of Singaporean values, while those who leave are nothing more than dissenters (Gomes 2009). Such tactics are effective for the majority of Singaporeans who are incredibly loyal to country and proud of the city state's global achievements. Eurasians, on the other hand, have been considered as 'disloyal' Singaporeans since they started emigrating out of Singapore as early as the mid-1970s.

Conclusion

On one level Singaporean comedies seem to have trouble exploring ethnicity honestly. This is particularly significant since the nation-state very strongly identifies itself as multicultural and accepting of ethnic diversity. Instead Singaporean comedies either sidestep the complexities of ethnicities outside the Chinese-Malay-Indian nexus or portray them reductively, or as comical over-the-top characters. However, on another level while such presentations of ethnic minorities may assist in creating a mirage of happy ethnic harmony through unproblematic and humorous portrayals of ethnic minorities, they provide an insight into how multiculturalism in Singapore can only cope within specific ethnic parameters. Anything outside the Chinese-Malay-Indian ethnic framework is incredibly challenging to understand and identify.

The ethnic and cultural landscape in Singapore is changing rapidly due to the increasing number of migrant workers from the region and beyond (Leong 2011), and Singaporean attitudes towards ethnicity have taken an interesting turn in response to the growing number of

foreigners living and working in the country which I explore in Chapters 4 through 6. Meanwhile in the following chapter I look at the Singapore Chinese and their use of active remembering to maintain cultural traditions and communal pride as mapped out by documentary film-maker Tan Pin Pin's work.

Chapter 3

Tapping into Unofficial Memory and Reclaiming History: Chinese Culture, Politics and Nation in the Cinema of Tan Pin Pin

The ethnic Chinese dominate the ethnographic landscape of the Singapore citizenry. With three quarters of Singaporeans officially identifying themselves as ethnic Chinese, the majority of Singapore's population, arguably, actively commemorate the cultural traditions of their communal group. However while the ethnic Chinese are a dominant force in Singapore's cultural discourse, they are increasingly finding it difficult to understand their Chinese identity due to acceptable government interpretations of Chineseness and to also practise their cultural traditions in this ever modernizing nation-state. In this chapter I look at the cinema of this visionary film-maker whose poignant yet powerful documentaries dare to represent ethnic Chinese concerns of cultural erosion and question Singapore's official scripted history.

Tan is perhaps Singapore's most well-known documentary film-maker. Tan's work has been screened locally and internationally with much critical acclaim. While Tan's work is not overtly political (Leow 2010), her work delves into a realm of Singapore's relationship to memory not otherwise covered by the mainstream media. Tan's films are recognized for featuring Singaporeans living on the fringe of society who would otherwise be forgotten in official remembering. Like another very well-known local independent film-maker Eric Khoo, Tan's work is celebrated for its commentary on the social ills that quietly blanket Singapore by featuring marginalized Singaporeans.

Tan is primarily known for her three films – *Moving House* (2001) which follows a family's exhumation and re-housing of their loved ones' remains, *Singapore GaGa* (2005) a film that pays homage to Singaporeans who live on the fringe of society and *Invisible City* (2007) which documents lost and forgotten memories. Tan's work serves to revisit and reclaim Singapore's past by sympathetically focusing on individuals who have contributed to the development of Singapore and its history, but who have done so outside, or in antagonism with, official remembering. As I write, Tan's latest film *To Singapore, With Love* (2013) about Singaporean political exiles is pushing both Tan and her work into popular imagination. This is because the Media Development Authority of Singapore which polices the media deemed the film a threat to national security and banned it from being screened locally. The film, which features now elderly men and women who were once involved in communist activities in Singapore, tell their side of the story and their deep and unending love for their country, is being screened globally at various film festivals.

Tan's fascination with and passion for remembering in Singapore is understandable against a background of strong local interest in the past is perhaps aided by the government's dedication to remembering. The Singapore government makes use of official remembering as a tool for nation building and nationalism while encouraging Singaporeans to document their own memories in various memory projects such those organized by the National Heritage Board and the National Library Board. Nostalgic recollections of a bygone Singapore seem to positively frame the act of remembering Singapore and its history as something personal and unofficial. Moreover, Singaporeans are exceedingly proud of their respective cultural heritage as seen in the ways in which they enthusiastically celebrate their respective

communal festivals such as Chinese New Year, Hari Raya Puasa (first day after the end of the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan) and Deepavali (Hindu festival of lights). Living in a multi-ethnic country has also led Singaporeans to value the cultural traditions of their respective ethnic communities. To maintain their respective cultural heritage, Singaporeans practice cultural commemoration most religiously.

Romancing the Past: Nostalgia in Singapore Television and Cinema

Online platforms provide avenues for Singaporeans to reminisce about the past. The advent of social media has seen a flurry of users on sites such as Facebook eagerly upload childhood photographs and then reminisce about them. Moreover, online platforms have also become a medium for some more organized documenting of Singapore's past, such as the comprehensive *Remember Singapore* blog (RemSG 2010). Singaporeans also enjoy romanticizing bygone eras such as the rocking 50s, the rolling 60s and the disco-feverish 70s – even if they themselves have no personal experience of those times.

The Japanese occupation of Singapore (1942-1945) is a traumatic era deeply embedded into the psyche of Singaporeans; many older Singaporeans can still recall life under the Japanese since they were born just before or during the occupation which is captured in stories recorded and housed at the Singapore National Archives. Meanwhile, younger Singaporeans have been exposed to the events, people and stories surrounding the occupation via official state commemoration and active remembering through public education, as well as personal memories shared within families. These include events such as the Sook Ching massacre that saw thousands of ethnic Chinese tortured and killed by the invaders and the stories of resilience of national heroes such as Elizabeth Choy. The Occupation, however, presents a wealth of stories – whether real or imagined – that waits to be harvested by the entertainment media. Local television and film producers have eagerly harnessed the attraction nostalgia holds for Singaporean audiences, resulting in some memorable and popular productions.

Television shows such as the variety series *Rolling Good Times* (Anon 1990) and the melodrama *Growing Up* (Anon 1996-2001) – both screened in the 1990s to early 2000s on Singapore's English-language television channel – and the Chinese-language 24 episode television drama *Samsui Women* (Anon 1986), were some of the earlier and very successful programmes to strike a favourable cord with local audiences. *Rolling Good Times* featured American and British pop songs from the perennially nostalgic 1960s sung by local professional and amateur artists, while *Growing Up* narrated the story of the Tay family which played out against the background of Singapore's development from the 1960s to the 1980s. More recently Singapore Chinese television has been featuring an epic historical television series dramatizing the exploits of a Peranakan (Straits-born Chinese) family told in 34 episodes called *The Little Nyonya* (Anon 2008). The serial takes place over an 80 year period beginning in 1930.

Both *Growing Up* and *The Little Nyonya* have been immensely popular with local audiences who are not only attracted to the nostalgia and period setting but also to the tragic drama that unfolds in each episode.¹ In *Growing Up*, popular protagonist Mrs Tay (Wee Soon Hui) – the matriarch of the family – is murdered in her neighbourhood. The day after the episode was screened; flagship English language newspaper *The Straits Times* ran a front-page story on the reaction of Singaporean audiences to the demise of Mrs Tay. In *The Little Nyonya*, long-suffering protagonist Yueniang (Jeanette Aw), whose traumatic adventures through life

anchor the serial, dies in the final episode. Yueniang succumbs to cancer just as she finds success and happiness in life.²

Highlighting the family as the central feature, storylines for both serials are often moralistic with an emphasis on filial piety. Good characters are portrayed as filial and dutiful while bad characters are portrayed as disloyal to the family. In *The Little Nyonya*, for instance, Yueniang's maternal family flees overseas to escape the Japanese occupation of Singapore and is portrayed upon returning to Singapore as selfish, cruel and physically abusive characters. Only bad people abandon their family in time of need.

Nostalgia also plays a significant role in the development and consumption of Singapore-made films.³ Unlike television serials though, films tend not to be as moralistic. Some of these films revisit familiar collective experiences of Singaporeans such as the comedy *Army Daze* (Ong 1996) – a film based on the experiences of author Michael Chiang and his adventures in the Singapore army as a conscript. Others relive eras that were host to much loved yet now forgotten parts of Singapore's past. While Singapore may be a clean, green, wealthy and modern state, its past is not so glorious. Colonial and newly independent Singapore was instead sordid, salacious and seedy. Films such as *Yao Jie Huang Hou/Bugis Street* (Yonfan 1995) and *Forever Fever* (Goei 1998) paint Singapore's past in contrasting hues to modern Singapore's promotion of social morality and heterosexual normality through their strong transsexual narratives and storylines. On one level, such films can obviously be read as a symbol of resistance to Singapore's presentation of itself as an ordered society. On another nuanced level, there seems to be an almost positive and nostalgic embrace of Singapore's colourful past through cinema. This past, however, is the antithesis of Singapore's official version of history.

Singapore after all actively remembers its past through official platforms such as museums, memorials and plaques that pepper the Singapore landscape (Gomes 2009). These repositories and sites of memory present a sanitized version of local history filled with value-stricken heroes and their unbridled contributions to Singapore's progress. In order of importance, these legends of Singapore history include: the architect of modern Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew; the founder of Singapore, Sir Stamford Raffles; and the most famous mainland Chinese in the twentieth century and father of Chinese nationalism, Sun Yat-sen.

Remembering Singapore: An Official Pastime of Nationalist Proportions

Most work in the area of memory focuses on the efforts of groups such as governments, organizations and individuals to commemorate the past (events and individuals) in the present. A significant body of work here is dedicated to memory and trauma, with particular focus on the Jewish Holocaust (e.g., Huyssen, 2003; Olick, 2008). A possible reason for the significance of the Jewish Holocaust in memory studies involves the settling of the Jewish diaspora after World War II. Despite being dispersed throughout Europe, America and Australia, the Jewish diaspora retained their memories of the Holocaust through personal testimonies, commemorative events, monuments, literary works, film and television. The film *Schindler's List* (Spielberg 1993) and the television miniseries *Holocaust* (1978) captured international popular imagination. Through these tools of remembering, both Jewish and non-Jewish people are kept familiar with the atrocities of the Holocaust and its powerful symbols such as the Auschwitz concentration camp. Moreover, the artefacts of memory also

function as a powerful and an emotive tool that emphasises and actively maintains certain community perspectives.

The literary classic *Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl* by eponymous heroine and diary-writer Anne Frank, first published posthumously in English in 1952, has been made into a theatrical play and a film and has appeared in other media forms as well. Likewise, there are works that specifically examine the way governments and powerful national figures manipulate remembering for the purpose of ideological advantage, political gain and nationalist advancement. Forest and Johnson (2002), in their work on the reinterpretation of Soviet monuments in the post-Soviet era (from 1991 to 1999), for example, argue that commemorative artefacts such as monuments are successfully manipulated by political elites for ideological control. Often such work involves the revisiting of traumatic and historical events for a particular effect in the present such as the monument at Poklonnaia Gora in Moscow that commemorates the Soviet defeat of Nazism. Certain events, in other words, are remembered over and above others, habitually as a result of ideological, political or nationalist reasons.

Some scholars such as Jan Assmann (1995: 125) argue that cultural memory functions as a kind of nationalism that preserves both society and culture from forces that threaten – whether real or imagined – the collective as a whole. Similarly, others such as Stefan Tanaka include the role played by art ‘in the formulation of belief in the nation’ (1994: 24). Nation states, Tanaka explains, rewrite their histories in order to ground themselves in the waves of modernity. The instruments of anchorage are their artefacts (such as fine art). By using the example of the Meiji period in Japan, Tanaka suggests that fine art provides a certain space for the development of modern/contemporary ideas of history, as such artefacts link past to present without temporal or spatial limitations/constrictions (1994: 24).

Memory is used as both a political and a social tool that keeps Singaporeans within a certain structured framework that does not encourage nor allow for dissent (popularly and officially known as The Singapore Story has been observed by commentators (Hong & Huang 2008; Gomes 2009 and 2010). This is because official remembering in Singapore emphasizes that an authoritarian government is more favourable than dissent, since it leads to stability, prosperity and wealth for the nation; if there is dissent and the People’s Action Party’s (PAP) rule is challenged at the polls, Singapore will implode.⁴ Dissent, Singaporeans are told, is a slippery slope leading only to disintegration of the economy and the delicate social fabric of multicultural Singapore.

Active remembering in Singapore is encouraged through official projects and schemes. The National Heritage Board has traditionally taken on the responsibility of promoting Singapore’s past. They operate various museums and sites of memory as well as curate an exciting ongoing collection of oral history through the National Archives of Singapore and the *Yesterday.sg* blog (National Heritage Board 2012) on Singapore heritage and history. The National Library Board has recently become involved in active remembering through the aptly named Singapore Memory Project. This scheme encourages Singaporeans to enthusiastically contribute to a database of nostalgic recollections of home and place. However, the underlining narrative that all Singaporean understand as chronicling their nation’s past comes in the form of an officially scripted account known as The Singapore Story. The term and cultural concept of The Singapore Story is taken from the 1998 memoir

of elder statesman and arguably architect of modern Singapore Lee Kuan Yew titled *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew* and its 2000 sequel titled *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew, Vol. 2: From Third World to First: 1965-2000*.

Singapore actively and officially remembers its past through a scripted national discourse that highlights the key points of Singapore's history from a colony of the British to the present day post-industrial position Singapore holds as a global city and economy. The history of Singapore – which is popularly and officially known as The Singapore Story has been observed by commentators (Hong & Huang 2008) to be a one-sided narrative filled with carefully thought through themes and values that support a free-market economy. Both the cultural concept and the book present Lee Kuan Yew and the ruling PAP as the heroes of the piece. It is straightforward narrative, with the heroes bringing about peace and prosperity to Singapore, while the villains bent on creating anarchy and chaos work against Lee and the PAP. It is also a narrative that highlights, not so subtly, Singaporean identity as a uniquely diasporic Singaporean-Chinese one, even though the nation state is a culturally diverse society made up of various ethnic groups other than the Chinese (Barr & Skrbiš 2008). In addition, while Chinese cultures and identities are themselves diverse, the government nominates Confucian Chinese culture and identity as the umbrella cultural identity for all Singaporean-Chinese.

Although Singapore's official past has been articulated as The Singapore Story only comparatively recently, this really is the only history most Singaporeans, particularly those born after 1965, are familiar with or aware of. From as early as primary school Singaporean children are indoctrinated with this version of Singapore's past as part of the curriculum that follows them right up to university. The Singapore national anthem is sung daily in all schools, while Singapore's National Day Parade is the national event which encourages Singaporeans to feel even more connected to each other and to the nation. Critics of the PAP often acknowledge that the ruling party has been very successful in creating a strong sense of nationalism amongst its citizens. The telecast of the National Day Parade is the most popularly watched television programme of the year.

The Singapore Story is inculcated into everyday life in Singapore and popular culture. The local public television station MediaCorp, which is fully owned by the government, often produces and screens aspects of The Singapore Story in documentary or fictional series form, for instance the English-language *A War Diary* (2001) and the Chinese-language *In Pursuit of Peace* (2001). Popular musicians record nationalist songs that are played repeatedly on television and on radio, particularly during the National Day season (about a month before and a few weeks after National Day on 9 August). Patriotic songs are also sometimes played on Singapore television, particularly those that highlight emotional ties to Singapore such as the famous Dick Lee written and Kit Chan sung 'Home'.

The Singapore government has also instilled the importance of remembering as a way of maintaining communal harmony by commemorating days of ethnic, religious and cultural significance as public holidays, and has allowed traditional rituals to thrive through festivals and events significant to the broader Chinese, Malay and Indian communities. Singapore officially classifies its citizens broadly into four racial categories: Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO). The Others category includes any minor ethnic group outside the predominantly CMI framework, such as Eurasians, Arabs, Armenians, Japanese and

Europeans. The Eurasians are considered the significant community within this grouping. The CMIO groupings exist regardless of the ethnic differences within each group. The most dominant ethnicity is used as the recognition shell for communal classification. So the Malayalees, Punjabis, Bengalis, Tamils, Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese are all grouped as Indian. All people from Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh for are also classified as Indian. In the Indian group, Tamil is the officially sanctioned language and Hinduism is classified as the official religion – regardless of the multiple languages and multiple religions reflective of the South Asian diaspora.

Writing on the significance of Chinese street opera in the 7 March 1998 edition of the Singapore Chinese-language daily *Lianhe Zaobao*, Lee Tong Soon (2002) cites then-Minister of Information George Yeo on the importance of such performances on collective memory and therefore on nationalist discourse: ‘Theatrical arts such as Chinese street opera are a form of our traditional culture that constitutes a kind of collective memory for us, linking the present generation to the previous generation, and thus worthy of preservation’ (T.S. Lee 2002: 140). Through government encouragement, Chinese opera in Singapore thus functions as a signifier for Chinese-Singaporeans to identify themselves with their culture and with each other. I will revisit and explore traditional rituals in more detail later in this chapter.

However, like the scripting of Singapore’s past, the Singapore government’s recognition of the significance of cultural commemoration is selective, as highlighted in the cinematic work of documentary film-maker Tan Pin Pin. By using the platform of documentary films Tan not only gives her audiences a sense of realism but also a sense of authenticity. Stories are not fictionalized or dramatized, but rather present ‘the real thing’. Of course a degree of artistic freedom is applied to make the films more aesthetically palatable to audiences (de Bromhead 1996). Tan is able to foreground her subjects, map the richness of their stories and explore events while at the same time engaging the audience and subtly question the Singaporean authorities. By questioning the government’s role in Chinese cultural preservation, inferring instead that there is cultural erosion, Tan’s cinema challenges official versions of Singapore’s past.

Remembering in the Cinema of Tan Pin Pin

Tan Pin Pin became interested in visual images while reading law at Oxford University in the late 1980s and early 1990s. An interest in photography soon became more than a hobby, with a short stint as photographer culminating in an exhibition of her work in Singapore in 1993. By then, Tan had begun to take her interest in the visual image to another level, the moving image. Tan started out working as an assistant director with the state television broadcaster Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS), now renamed MediaCorp, on the popular English-language television series *Triple Nine* (Kwok 1995-1999). Tan then went to Northwestern University on a S. Rajaratnam Scholarship to undertake a Masters in Fine Art in film (K.P. Tan 2011). While at Northwestern, Tan began making avant-garde independent films such as *Lurve Me Now* (1999).

However, Tan’s true passion lay in documentary films. While still a student at Northwestern, Tan made the critically acclaimed and award-winning docu-film, *Moving House*. This masterpiece was to be the first of three documentary films – *Moving House*, *Singapore GaGa* and *Invisible City* – that focus on everyday Singaporeans doing extraordinary things. Her

films pay homage to the people that local audiences might see and hear on a daily basis but never acknowledge or take much notice of. In particular, Tan taps into her subjects' memories, getting them to tell their stories. Memory in Tan's cinema is not just a theme, but rather is her muse.⁵

In *Singapore GaGa* memories of a simpler life in Singapore are displayed in the segments featuring avant-garde toy pianist Margaret Leng Tan and her composition incorporating the *tok-tok* man. The *tok-tok* man, who by the late 1970s became all but extinct, was a mobile noodle seller who announced his presence by hitting a wooden block, which made a *tok-tok* sound. Margaret Tan, a diasporic Singaporean artist who has faced her fair share of rejection from the Singaporean public, provides homage to her homeland through her memories of a bygone Singapore. This Singapore is the country that older Singaporeans seem to remember not only as a simpler time, but also as a time when society was more interactive. As Margaret Tan says, 'the *tok-tok* man will come and his arrival announced with the sound of the tok-tok; people then interact with this tradesman'. However, the films that really feature memory as the star are *Moving House* and *Invisible City*.

Moving House documents a Singapore family's exhumation of their ancestors' remains to a new place of rest after a forced land reclamation due to a new housing development, while *Invisible City* explores the memories of Singaporeans who are passionate about the country they live in but in a way that is contrary to official government discourse. In these films memory serves three purposes: as a device to sensitively and emotively tell stories of individuals whose voices would otherwise not be heard; as an effective avenue to approach and to rethink the remembering of Singapore's past; and to fill in the gaps left by official Singapore history.

Invisible City is an incredibly poignant film that focuses on documenting memory by paying homage to those responsible for collecting and respecting memories over the past half century such as filmmakers and photographers. The film honours the people and their memories that have not been captured by official remembering. In doing so, *Invisible City* provides a subtle alternative voice to official remembering. For instance, *Invisible City* features British-born BBC cinematographer and medical doctor Ivan Polunin and his extensive work documenting Singapore. Polunin successfully captured a Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s that many Singaporeans today are unfamiliar with. Also an expert on tropical medicine, Polunin as part of his medical work filmed a Singapore that was people-centred. *Invisible City* highlights some of this footage, which features hawkers at markets and Orang Asli (indigenous of Peninsular Malaysia) communities who inhabited the once forested areas of Johor and Singapore. These are people not remembered as part of official remembering, since they are not part of the progress-through-industrialization narrative Singaporeans are more familiar with. Likewise, many of the places that Polunin documented exist now only in his footage.

The effectiveness of Tan's treatment of memory, in terms of her contribution to remembering in Singapore, is well recognized by commentators of Singapore culture and cinema (Harvey 2006). For instance, Goh, Lim and Tang (2005) note that Tan effectively conveys the sense of lost history Singaporeans are grappling with in her films. Meanwhile Leow (2010) observes that Tan and other contemporary Singaporean artists such as Alfian Sa'at reclaim and imagine Singapore's past both sensitively and poignantly through their work. They do this by providing a voice to those who have been shunned by Singapore's official reworking

of Singaporean history and memory. Their reclamation and imagination of Singapore's past through the memories of the subjects, as Leow suggests, is made even more significant since Tan and Sa'at deal with a history that they have not lived through but thoroughly respect. Leow observes that Tan's

attempt to uncover new stories, alternate histories and forgotten voices can be seen as a way to fill in the gaps and present a more complete story of Singapore's past ... [and that her] ... efforts can be seen as an effort to write a history of an invisible Singapore, a subterranean layer of the palimpsest of its history, as a de Certeau-like 'tactic' that uses personal memory as an intervention in the grand 'strategy' of Singapore's official history. (2010: 121)⁶

Additionally, Tan's work provides a subtle tool for questioning the government's recording of its past. A quote from Cinéma du Réel on the DVD cover of *Invisible City* praises the film as '[a] witty, challenging essay on history and memory as tools of civil resistance'. While this is specific to *Invisible City*'s documentation of a Singapore history from alternative sources outside the official discourse, it also aptly describes *Moving House* and *Singapore GaGa*. Tan after all is able to use remembering as one of the 'tools of civil resistance', and thus circumvents Singapore's strict media censorship laws. A favourite and effective platform of hers in this regard is the Singaporean-Chinese community.

People, Identity, Culture: 'Chineseness' as a Platform for Civil Resistance

Tan uses the term 'Chineseness' in terms of a people, identity and culture in order to highlight, question and provide alternative perspectives of Singapore's past. While Tan has been sometimes criticized for heavily featuring the Chinese in her work (Hong 2008), doing so enables a clear platform to address the state of remembering in Singapore. Tan is able to directly address official remembering in Singapore since the diasporic ethnic Chinese and Confucian Chinese cultures are the key players in The Singapore Story.

In their excellent analysis of the cultural construct The Singapore Story, Hong and Huang (2008) paint a daringly honest picture of a nation whose government has never been shy of expressing their admiration for the hard-working Chinese migrants of colonial Singapore and the nationalist diasporic Chinese. They (unsurprisingly) assert that Singapore's history is 'scripted', that the past is distilled to highlight only specific heroes in the story of Singapore. Besides Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP – whose exploits contributed to freeing Singapore from the clutches of communism and racial unrest, and then led the nation to enjoy the fruits of capitalism in a nation blessed by racial harmony – the other hero of The Singapore Story is the superhero of the overseas (diasporic) Chinese community, Sun Yat-sen. What Hong and Huang strongly imply is that The Singapore Story, while uncomplicated in its choice of national heroes, is ultimately a contrived one that underpins and supports the national values of the state with a strongly ethnic Chinese hue. The choice of non-Singaporean Sun Yat-sen as an elevated hero in Singapore supports the strong diasporic Confucian Chinese value system, which Singapore has adopted and adapted for itself. This value system becomes the very tool with which the government controls Singaporean society and dictates national allegiance to both the state and ruling party. Here the value system of the diasporic Chinese is highlighted as the ideal and necessary framework for the past, present and future economic successes of Singapore, as well as a platform for creating stability. However, there is irony in

a nation priding itself on multiculturalism while strongly displaying its favouritism and admiration of the Chinese in Singapore above all others.

While Singapore may be dominated demographically by the ethnic Chinese, and with its official history and value system deeply entrenched in a carefully scripted past, all is not well for the everyday Singaporean-Chinese themselves, many of whom are Chinese-educated unlike the English-educated elite, many of who inhabit the ranks of the PAP. Tan's cinema reveals that some Singaporean-Chinese are struggling with what they see as Chinese cultural erosion as their traditions adapt to the unstoppable Singaporean road of modernity, while others struggle with their forgotten place in Singapore's official remembering of its past.



Figure 3.1: Remembering the early Chinese people and their cultural practices are highlighted in the National Museum of Singapore. Singapore Living Galleries – Photography, National Museum of Singapore. Photo taken when author visited the gallery in 2008.

Tan's featuring of Chineseness is not surprising, since her work honestly portrays Singaporean society as rooted in various aspects of Chinese culture. Singapore may be officially a multiracial and multicultural society but it is its Chineseness that influences and provides a baseline for Singaporean society in terms of the country's official values. Tan uses Chinese culture as her platform and taps into the Chinese community for her exploration into what Singaporean-Chinese feel are important issues to them. In doing so she reveals a deep sense of discontent for not only the government, but also the speed at which Singapore is progressing at the expense of ethnic cultural traditions. Her films reveal a political

undercurrent of reclaiming memories of events that contradict official discourse, while providing everyday Singaporeans with a voice to tell *their* version of events.

While the Chinese are demographically the most dominant group in Singapore, they, like the minority groups – namely the Malays, the Indians and the Eurasians – do feel a sense of cultural erosion. While a separate discussion is needed for the kinds of cultural erosion the non-Chinese groups experience, Tan's cinema tells us that there are ethnic Chinese who themselves feel displaced in Singapore's version of Chinese culture and identity. They experience displacement for a variety of reasons, some being, broadly: the rise of the English-educated elites and their domination of the government; the dissolution of various Chinese languages through the Speak Mandarin Campaign; and the perceived threat posed by the entry of a new mainland Chinese workforce.

The Chinese-educated in Singapore have long held the belief that there is a rising tide of English-educated elites controlling Singapore (Barr & Skrbis 2008; Chua 2009). These English-educated elites are ethnic Singaporean-Chinese who have studied at top Western universities overseas, often on government scholarship. Sooner or later the English-educated elites fill both high-level civil service positions and political positions as Members of Parliament under the PAP banner. This notion of the elite English-educated PAP MP has created a schism in Singapore, where working-class Singaporeans – regardless of ethnic grouping – believe strongly that the PAP has lost touch with everyday Singaporeans because of the strong elitist culture prevalent in the government.

However, many other Singaporean-Chinese, particularly the Chinese-educated and those who are more comfortable conversing with friends and family in Chinese dialects, have often felt their culture is being eroded because of government policies (Heng & Devan 1995). Singaporean-Chinese are primarily Han Chinese who arrived from different regions in southern China and spoke mainly the Chinese dialects of Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese. However, in order to create a sense of homogeneity amongst Singaporean-Chinese, the PAP instigated language policies that promoted Mandarin, through the Speak Mandarin Campaign, and strongly encouraged dissolution of the provincial dialects.⁷ Mandarin is not the vernacular of the Chinese migrants who flocked to Singapore during the nation's time as a British colony.⁸ Singaporean-Chinese thus have been feeling their culture(s) eroding since language is an obvious signifier and transporter of culture. To add insult to injury, the government made it mandatory for school-aged children with Chinese dialect names to officially change their names to Mandarin when it came to Romanised spelling and pronunciation. So a student with the surname Tan is officially transformed into a Chen. Not only were the cultural identities of Chinese-Singaporeans at stake, but also their clan and family identities. While the Speak Mandarin Campaign was launched in 1979 and is ongoing, the changing of student names in the official school register proved so unpopular that it was done away with ten years after the start of the campaign.

While many Singaporeans can trace their lineage to mainland China, they do not, however, consider themselves emotionally connected to that homeland or for that matter to the mainland Chinese. Perhaps a reason for this phenomenon can be attributed to the inability of Singaporean-Chinese to recognize modern-day China as the same homeland of their ancestors due to changes in political ideology. China's adoption of communism – the political ideology the Singapore government is perpetually at war with – has caused tension between the two

nations despite the cultural overlap. The resulting Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) completely severed any link Singaporean-Chinese had with their ancestral home, since all that was culturally recognizable by the diasporic ethnic Chinese was purged.

Cultural Traditions Matter

Organized community remembering in the modern era is complicated. Modernity creates certain challenges to the stability of the nation state, conceptually and in practice. Arjun Appadurai (1996) observes that a symptom of modernity is the global cultural flow of people, media, technology, finance and ideas. These transnational exchanges have resulted in the creation of imagined communities outside of their geographical, national and ethnographic boundaries. The idea of nation becomes complicated when conventional physical barriers collapse. In his work on nationalism, Benedict Anderson (1983) explains that his understanding of the nation is complex, as it departs from ideas of colonial struggles into something else in this modern era. He further explains that ideas of nation (nationalism, nation-ness) are still informed and complicated by events in history, geography, regional politics (political proximity), migration and demographics (historical events and geography). He notes, however, that because of globalization, nations are now not limited to physically confined spaces but instead can be entities of imagined political communities that are 'both inherently limited and sovereign'. (1991: 224)

While memory in Singapore is played out in the public domain and navigated by government policies, projects and programmes, it also exists outside this realm and plays a significant role unifying both Singaporeans of different ethnicities with each other and within their own community groups. Singaporeans place emphasis on remembering ethnic cultural and religious heritage for a plethora of reasons that include the importance placed on preserving tradition, the maintaining of communal homogeneity in multi-cultural/ethnic/lingual/religious Singapore and the stability which rituals bring when nations modernize. Georg Simmel (1979), for instance, explains that a society draws on tradition (religion, cultural ideology) in order to provide stability in an unstable situation created by economic change due to modernity. In Singapore, ethnic cultural heritage is very much intertwined with religious belief; hence the rituals expressed by ethnic cultural heritage are inextricably bound to religion.

Tradition and Progress

Singapore, as mentioned earlier, is a nation that thrives on rituals cultivated by the government for the purpose of nationalism. Yet practised rituals in this city state are inherited through religious traditions with strong interconnected ethnic and cultural communalism. Singapore is host to the major religions of Asia: Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Taoism and Christianity. Religion plays a fundamental role in the lives of Singaporeans, with the vast majority of the population describing themselves as connected to a religious group that is often connected to the racial cultures. The exception to the rule is Christianity, which is represented in all cultural-ethnic groups, with the exception of the Malay Muslim community.

Tan Pin Pin's *Moving House* functions as a critical essay that links the importance of tradition to the Singaporean-Chinese. Through the depiction of a Taoist family's exhumation of their

loved ones, the film demonstrates the subtle anger and disappointment Singaporean-Chinese have with the country's rapid progress at the expense of cultural traditions. According to the latest Singapore Department of Statistics (2010: ix), 14.4 per cent of Singaporean-Chinese consider themselves practising Taoists. However 57.4 per cent of Singapore Chinese consider themselves Buddhist/Taoist and who observe both Buddhist and Taoist traditions and rituals. The film eloquently and sensitively documents the relocation of the Chew family's ancestors (the parents of the older generation featured) from their resting place of almost three decades on a hill to a newly built high-rise columbarium not dissimilar from the high-rise Housing & Development Board (HDB) flats most Singaporeans live in. The exhumation is a necessary part of Singapore's quest for modernity since the land was needed for development by the Singapore government. The Chews however, are not alone in the exhumation and relocation of their dead. We are told by the narrator of *Moving House*, Remesh Panicker, that 55,000 families will conduct a similar exercise because the 'Singapore government requires this land for further national development. The Chew's parents have to move'. Implying that progress is conducted at the expense of cultural tradition, the narrator solemnly continues: 'For Singaporeans, moving, rebuilding and resettling – whether voluntary or involuntary is a way of life. And the dead are not exempt.' The film emphasizes the place tradition holds in people's lives in terms of heritage and filial piety through the practice and performance of religious rituals of everyday Singaporeans. Religious rituals are practised out of sincerity and not because of government dictates.

Brought together by Death

On one level, this film is about the significance of cultural tradition, which is performed in the film by the Chews through the rituals they practise as part of filial piety and reverence to their dead relatives. Traditional culture through ancestor worship allows for a sense of community and belonging that links family – alive and dead – with each other. The reclamation of the parents' graves allows different generations of this family to feel a connection to each other, their ancestors, their community and their culture. These connections are strengthened through religious ritualistic practice. It is religion that allows for a wider net to be cast in terms of belonging through communal and cross-communal ties. As one of the family members, Mr 'A' Chew, comments (in Mandarin with English subtitles): 'Personally, I don't agree with the exhumation exercise because when our ancestors die, they are buried in an auspicious location so their spirits can absorb the good feng shui elements from that location to transmit the good feng shui to the future generations in our family.'

Singaporeans are generally incredibly religious and express their beliefs through superstition. Taoists for instance, believe that there are direct connections between the peace their ancestors find in death with the well-being of their living relatives.⁹ Taoists place great importance on ancestral worship as they believe that looking after their ancestors – by visiting their resting places and taking care of them by burning incense and bringing them food – has a direct impact on the welfare of the surviving relatives.

Taoist beliefs about ancestral worship work well alongside the Christian Catholic practice of respecting the dead on All Souls' Day on 2 November. Here Catholics pray for the deliverance of the dead into Heaven rather than praying to the dead for success of the living. Catholics also visit the graves and columbarium niches of their departed loved ones. While All Souls' Day is set aside for honouring the dead, Catholics are also permitted to offer mass

to their loved ones or visit their final resting places throughout the year. While there are obvious differences between the ways in which the Taoists and Christians treat and think of their dead, there is a respectful understanding between these major religions and their followers of the significance of those who have passed on.

Death in Singapore is a festive and communal event, albeit a sad one, regardless of ethnic cultural and religious affiliations. Death brings together friends, relatives, co-workers and acquaintances of the deceased during mourning rituals, which last anywhere from a day (for Muslims who try to bury their dead within 24 hours) to four days before burial. Generally Singaporeans adopt Chinese superstitions in the number of days put aside for a wake, as even numbers rather than odd numbers are considered more auspicious and appropriate. The afterlife is also big business in Singapore, with the housing and commemoration of the dead a thriving enterprise in itself. Columbariums pepper the island because of the scarcity of land and can be astonishingly elaborate places with chandeliers, piped music and air conditioning.¹⁰

Against the Odds: Cultural Adaptation

Moving House functions as a form of criticism of Singapore's rapid progress and subtly questions the decisions made by the ruling PAP government. This is quite clearly emphasized through the interviews with two of the Chew sons. One son, Mr 'B' Chew is resigned to his dead parents' situation but is also concerned about the use of land in Singapore. On the drive to Mandai Crematorium where his parents are to be interned in niches, he laments:

They have been resting down there for 20 or so years. All of a sudden, we disturb them. Sad! Most unfortunate, our country's area is small. Why should they have so many golf course? [sic] A waste of land too. Why can't they provide this land for a permanent cemetery so that the traditions can be maintained?

In not so subtle terms, Mr 'B' Chew questions the wisdom of the government in its (re)development of land in land-scarce Singapore. His comments on the priority of building golf courses over and above the building of a cemetery reveal a not-so-subtle criticism of the government's 'forgetting' of cultural traditions for the sake of progress. In land-scarce Singapore and on its satellite holiday island Sentosa; there are seventeen golf courses and eighteen golf driving ranges (Poon 2009). At the same time, there is also a questioning of the welfare of everyday (living) Singaporeans who have to live – like the re-housed dead – in crowded flats while golf courses – a symbol of play and business for the wealthy few – pepper the Singapore landscape. As Mr 'B' Chew notes: 'In this type of area, if the whole family comes to pay their respects, see how crowded, no standing space.' He continues later in the film: 'When I offer my prayer, I told my late parents, we have no choice but to exhume you, because our government requires the land, we hope you will keep protecting and blessing us'.

Moreover, the sense of community through the cultural practice of worshipping the dead is sacrificed. As the other son, Mr 'C' Chew states: 'Without the cemetery, I think the

atmosphere and tradition will die off. As a matter of fact, I have decided, after putting my parents in the crematorium I won't go during the Qingming Festival, I will only go there on their death anniversary.' While Mr 'B' Chew states: 'In the past, we would bring all kinds of home cooked food, we'd buy a big watermelon to cut it up there to share with everyone. Now, there can be no more such gatherings'.

Moving House does acknowledge, however, that Singapore has had no choice but to modernize by reclaiming and redeveloping burial sites for residential and commercial use. *Moving House* also functions as a celebration of the ways in which Singaporeans are able to adapt their cultural traditions to rapidly modernizing Singapore. As with the exhumation and reburial of the Chew family ancestors, *Singapore GaGa* presents the various ways in which some sectors of the Singaporean-Chinese community attempt to maintain their cultural traditions in the face of what they consider to be cultural erosion. Maintaining cultural tradition against government-sanctioned cultural erosion encourages certain Singaporeans to stand up to their government.

Defying the Government: Cultural Maintenance and Reclaiming the Past

Maintenance of culture by Singaporean-Chinese sometimes takes place by actively defying and countering Singapore government directives to homogenize Chinese culture. *Singapore GaGa* features a segment on a radio station featuring different Chinese dialects. The radio station exists in order to provide a service to Singaporean-Chinese unable to speak Mandarin or English. Doing so means that the station also helps maintain the richness of Chinese languages other than government-approved Mandarin on the airwaves. Likewise, a segment featuring musician Yew Hong Chow, a harmonica expert, is critical of the Singapore government's policy on music education in schools. Yew notes that the choice of instruments that primary and secondary children learn in schools such as the recorder – a European instrument – is an example of one way in which the government has forgotten traditional Chinese culture. After all, it is the harmonica that is symbolic of Chinese culture and not the recorder. The harmonica, or *sheng*, is a traditional Chinese instrument. To add credence to this, *Singapore GaGa* features well-respected musician and music educationist Alex Abisheganaden who also criticizes the use of the recorder. In addition, he states that the recorder as the instrument of choice shows a lack of foresight on the part of the government, since it is an incredibly difficult instrument to master. Rather than look to the local ethnic cultures of Singapore such as China, Abisheganaden reasons that the decision to place emphasis on the recorder was based on the experiences of the Singaporean leaders who were schooled in Europe.

Tan Pin Pin's presentation of Singapore-Chinese concerns about their culture perhaps reflects the ways in which they see Singapore: as a country that has abandoned rather than embraces the richness and diversity of Chinese culture. Tan's cinema however does not merely focus on cultural commemoration. Her work also takes issue with the sacred cow of Singapore history. The Singapore government relies on the demographically dominant Chinese people to create a specific national identity that has become the cornerstone of Singaporean nationalism as expressed in the cultural concept of The Singapore Story. However, while The Singapore Story depends on Chinese culture as its national framework, it also demonizes the local Chinese communists, representing them as the villains of the piece; Tan urges us to

reconsider this narrative by providing us with their side of the tale, which she chronicles in both *Singapore GaGa* and *Invisible City*.

As I briefly mentioned earlier, the communists in Singapore had strong links to communist China and consisted almost solely of local ethnic Chinese members. While they played a role in fighting the Japanese through guerrilla activities during the Japanese occupation of Singapore and many of its members supported the People's Action Party during the quest for self-government from the British in the post-war years, they soon fell out of favour with the British and the PAP when many communists resorted to terrorist activities to derail the colonial government. A number of communist-led riots in Singapore took place prior to independence in 1965.

Communism was in the spotlight again in 1987, but this time because of the PAP's controversial capture and detention of 22 young Catholic workers, social activists and professionals for conspiring to overthrow the PAP government and turn Singapore into a Marxist state. The Singapore Story presents communism as a destructive force that looms as a threat to the healthy social fabric of Singaporean society. This representation of instability is strongly evoked through the National Museum of Singapore's extensive exhibition dedicated to the communist threat. It features artefacts such as radio broadcasts, education documentation, newspaper headlines and reports, and dramatic photographs of the devastation caused by the Chinese communists at the time. Today, Singapore still uses the threat of communism as a tool for nation building, as seen in recent educational productions by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, such as the documentary *Riding the Tiger: The Chronicle of a Nation's Battle Against Communism* (2001). *Singapore GaGa* and *Invisible City* attempt to circumvent the national narrative that demonizes communism and present stories of patriotism from ageing former communists.

Singapore GaGa is a moving film that features Singaporeans living on the fringe, those who are seen by many yet ignored and eventually forgotten. One of the most poignant stories featured is of elderly Guo Ren Huey and his wife, both of whom used to be part of Malayan Communist Party in Singapore and were particularly active in fighting off the Japanese during the occupation of Singapore. They are a loving couple and now in their old age he looks after her since, according to him, she has 'forgotten many things...everything is forgotten'. To help her remember, he sings to her the songs of their youth. The songs, while helpful for his wife, also play a role in helping audiences understand more about Singapore history. This is because the songs are tunes they used to sing while in the underground communist party in the 1940s and 1950s. The songs thus function as precious artefacts, which have otherwise been erased because of the Singapore government's outlawing of communism. The segment becomes a thinly veiled criticism of Singapore's selective history played against a backdrop of a country which actively encourages remembering of its past, albeit a past peppered with specific heroes and themes scripted for nation building, and ultimately providing prominence to the ruling party as authors of modern city state.



Figure 3.2: Still of Guo Ren Huey singing with his wife in the background. From the DVD version of *Invisible City* (Objectifs 2007).

Tan respects and very openly addresses the role that is played by personal memories as providing a perspective that either contextualises or provides a comparative analysis of official history. Here Tan links the notion of personal memories to the broader context of Singapore's own official memory concerning the local ethnic Chinese communists. While official remembering of communism in Singapore paints a picture of communists as demonic figures bent on creating upset and chaos in the city state, Tan's tapping into the personal memories of Guo Ren Huey provides another perspective of communism's history in Singapore. The former communists are presented not as rabble-rousers out to create terror and discord, but rather as fervent nationalists whose vivid memories of the violence they encountered at the hands of the Japanese bear testament to their patriotism.

Invisible City's vindication of the patriotism of the Chinese communists continues in the presentation of former journalist Han Tan Juan as he relates the experience of violence at the hands of police in colonial Singapore during the 1956 Chung Cheng High School incident. The Singapore government remembers this incident as part of the Chinese middle school student riots. These students, according to the government, were communists and therefore dedicated to disruption and chaos in fragile Singapore. Han Tan Juan, a student activist fighting for independence from the colonial government at the time, recalls the incident through a series of personal photographs he reveals in *Invisible City*. It is difficult to not feel sympathy for Han Tan Juan, because it seems that official history has not acknowledged him as a Singaporean patriot, since it condemns him as a traitor and a dissenter due to his communist beliefs and affiliations during his activist days. *Invisible City* provides him with a

platform to tell his version of the story and express his feelings about the event and his role in it.

Invisible City ends on a poignant and subtly alarming note about modern young Singaporeans' lack of interest Singapore's history. The film concludes with Han Tan Juan talking about his experiences with a group of ethnic Chinese high school students at a seminar organized by civil society group The Tangent at the National Library. Han Tan Juan is able to publicly discuss his experiences because of the Singapore government's realization that it has had to acknowledge the parts played by these Singapore-Chinese as part of its 'valorization of 'Chinese culture'' (Hong 2008). While the Singapore government still strongly demonizes communism as a threat to the nation's stability, it does choose heroes amongst the scoundrels for the purpose of valorizing choice aspects of Chinese culture. As Hong points out: 'Han Tan Juan is a 2007 recipient of the Public Administration medal (bronze) for his work as director, North East Community Division, People's Association; Guo Ren Huey has a 29-minute tape recording in the Oral History Centre under the rubric "Political Development in Singapore, 1945-1965."' (2008: 4) His testimony about unknowingly enlisting into the Malayan Communist Party to fight the Japanese and not realizing that its chief Lai Teck was a double agent forms the basis of the first part of the DVD *Riding the Tiger* (Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts 2001).

Rather than being interested in what he has to say about the Chinese communists as part of Singapore-Chinese heritage however, the students looked bored and indifferent. While their apathy may be merely a symptom of their youth, this next generation of leaders might well echo the observations made by Japanese journalist Izumi Ogura earlier in the film. Here she expresses concern about government leaders and their acknowledgement of the past when she observes that there are members of the Japanese Diet who are unaware of the atrocities committed by the Japanese imperial army during the occupation of Asia in World War II.

Conclusion

The Singaporean-Chinese indeed dominate Singapore primarily as a consequence of demographics. The government no doubt favours the ethnic Chinese by adopting and valorizing Chinese culture as part of its nation-building efforts. However, while Chineseness prevails overwhelmingly in Singapore, there are local Chinese who themselves struggle with Singaporean-Chinese culture. This is because the PAP government selects certain aspects of Chinese culture – while erasing others which they believe appropriate and useful for nation building and ultimately supportive of their mandate to rule Singapore. The cinema of Tan Pin Pin sensitively and provocatively peels away layers of memory to reveal the issues that occupy sectors of the ethnic Chinese community.

The next chapter takes a look at a different kind of anxiety towards ethnic community but still within the vein of Chinese ethnicity. Rather than Singaporean-Chinese being the subject of study, the focus instead is on mainland Chinese migrants while the film I use is *Shier Low/12 Storeys* by well-known film-maker Eric Khoo. I do this against a background that looks at and analyzes the ways in which Singaporeans have taken to online platforms as a response to new migrants on the whole. Singaporeans feel threatened with the great number of the migrants arriving into Singapore particularly from mainland China, South Asia, the Philippines and Indonesia to take up professional and unskilled positions. These anxieties

take place even though the majority of Singaporeans trace their lineage back to mainland China and to India while Indonesia and the Philippines are neighbouring South East Asian nations. Moreover, Chapters 4 to 6 allude to the notion that the presence of new migrants has galvanized an otherwise disparate Singaporean population through a collective sense of anxiety.

Chapter 4

Migrant Loathing: Understanding Anxiety over Chinese Mainlanders in Eric Khoo's *Shier Lou/12 Storeys*

In 1997, up and coming Singapore film maker Eric Khoo released a film called *Shier Lou/12 Storeys* on the back of his critically successful dark film *Mee Pok Man* (1995)¹. Khoo, who is today widely acknowledged as the godfather of contemporary independent filmmaking in the city-state and whose films are favorites at local and international film festivals, also subtly captures the tensions between Singaporeans and new migrants as they enter into the country before Singaporeans began to take their grievances about new migrants online in the mid to late 2000s. In particular, Khoo's *12 Storeys* puts the relationship between Singaporeans and mainland Chinese under the microscope by featuring the unhappy and loveless marriage between Singaporean Ah Gu (Jack Neo) and Lily (Chuan Yi Fong) his China-born wife whom, the film implies, met through a matchmaking agency catering for Singapore men to find wives from China. Even though Lily is not a worker migrant, the tensions between the couple expressed in *12 Storeys* was an early indication of how the presence of new migrants – many of whom share the same ancestral homes as Singapore-born citizens, cause unease, paranoia and suspicion. This chapter takes a look at the relationship between Ah Gu and Lily as a metaphor for exploring the tensions between Singaporeans and mainland Chinese migrants and locates it within Khoo's storytelling techniques. It considers some possible reasons as to why these tensions exist particularly since the majority of Singaporeans, who themselves are ethnic Chinese; all trace their ancestry to China. This chapter then takes advantage of the discussion on Chinese mainland migrant in to look at current Singaporean attitudes toward new (permanent and professional) migrants by analyzing xenophobic online comments directed at these new settlers who are commonly known as 'foreign talent'.

The Cinema of Eric Khoo and *12 Storeys*

In their survey of the Singapore film industry a number of commentators mention that the contemporary Singapore film-making scene is defined by two main players: Jack Neo and Eric Khoo (Tan, Lee & Aw 2003; Chua & Yeo 2003). While Jack Neo is associated with Singapore mainstream films exploring Singaporean society and culture, Eric Khoo is internationally and locally renowned as an independent film-maker of credibility and merit. While Khoo has been involved in both independent and commercial films as a producer, writer and director for most of his career, he is primarily known for making four independent films through his production company Zhao Wei Films: *Mee Pok Man* (1995), *12 Storeys* (1997), *Be With Me* (2005) and *My Magic* (2008). It is however *Mee Pok Man* and *12 Storeys* that have had the most impact on Singapore film culture, the latter of which this chapter will engage more fully with in relation to Singaporean attitudes towards foreign migrants, and in particular, Chinese mainlanders.

12 Storeys has been an international film festival favourite and the subject of enthusiastic critical interest by both local and international film studies experts. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar (2006) write that Eric Khoo's *12 Storeys* is a significant film in the wider Chinese diasporic film industry. Tan, Lee and Aw (2006), meanwhile, paint Khoo's *12 Storeys* as distinctive and worthy examples of contemporary film-making in Singapore.

With his characteristic dark narratives, Khoo fits quite well into Helen Stoddart's (1995: 40) definition of the auteur, where a 'true auteur' is 'distinguished by the presence in each film, above and beyond generic variations, of a distinctive personality, expressed as a world-view or vision, which would thereby constitute a trace or 'personal stamp' of the director's presence in the film and therefore within their oeuvre'.

12 Storeys contains dark and pessimistic narratives by featuring three stories set in a particular block of flats. The first story follows San San (Lucilla Teoh), a grown woman who is constantly verbally abused by the spirit of her dead adopted mother. She is finally able to find peace for both herself and the nefarious spirit after she presents a gift to a rich woman who her adopted mother was once a nanny to. The adopted mother is not the only spirit that is associated with San San; since she is watched over by the ghost of a young man she witnessed commit suicide on the twelfth storey of her block of flats. The second story features a family of three siblings who have been left to their own devices by their absent parents. The oldest sibling, Meng (Koh Boon Pin), has been left in charge of the household and takes his job as temporary guardian of his younger teenage siblings seriously. However, Meng is also a repressed graduate high school teacher who is sexually attracted to his promiscuous younger sister Mei, also known as Trixie (Lum May Yee). Meng makes his sexual fantasies of his sister a reality and rapes her, only to severely regret it. The film ends with Meng being picked up by police while in a state of violent intoxication after the rape. The final story centres on newlyweds Ah Gu, a buck-toothed soya bean seller and his Chinese-born wife Lily. Ah Gu appears to be hen-pecked by his promiscuous and vain wife who is plainly unhappy with their marriage – she left her true love in China to marry the Singaporean Ah Gu. Her anger and attitude towards Ah Gu stems from his fooling her into thinking that he was a wealthy Singaporean businessman.

The gritty darkness of Khoo's films has been interpreted by some scholars such as Gina Marchetti (2005a) and Tan See-Kam (2009) as representing the social realism of a seedier side of Singapore that defies both popular local and international imagination. Marchetti, for instance, believes that *12 Storeys* reveals the social realities of the underclass in cosmopolitan and wealthy Singapore. Khoo's protagonists after all are the underclass, and his narratives unashamedly feature the deplorable conditions accorded to those who live below the poverty line in affluent Singapore. Khoo's fascination with and presentation of the social issues affecting the underclass have indeed defined him as a distinctive film-maker in Singapore.

To explore this generally unseen side of Singapore, Khoo's cinema grounds its narratives through exploration of the Singaporean-Chinese community. With the exception of *My Magic*, which has largely an ethnic Indian cast and is filmed in the Tamil language, Khoo's films prominently feature ethnic Chinese-Singaporeans speaking Mandarin and the various Chinese dialects. *12 Storeys* is not exceptional in their presentation of the Chinese face in Singapore cinema, as they accurately present ethnic Chinese demographics – an issue which I have already addressed in this book – but they portray a different class of Chinese-Singaporeans. English-educated Khoo's affinity towards the underclass is made all the more intriguing since he is the scion of one of the wealthiest families in Singapore. Khoo's family, amongst other things, owns the luxurious five-star Singapore heritage listed Goodwood Park Hotel.

While commentators of Khoo's cinema state that his work provides a glimpse of the social realities of the underclass in cosmopolitan and affluent Singapore by featuring the seedier side of the city state, there is more to Khoo's darkness. This aspect of *12 Storeys* does not serve as a mere foil to Singaporean society, but also functions as a platform that explores the issues and concerns that confront Singapore society at large. Khoo's films may portray the underclass and their environment, but the issues his protagonists face are perennial issues that challenge many Singaporeans. While there are various issues that are played out in *12 Storeys* such as loneliness, sexual frustration and boredom, the fear of mainland Chinese migrants is a subtle yet concrete presence in the film. To understand how *12 Storeys* is able to reveal the subtext of the everyday issues that confront ordinary Singaporeans living in a nation that essentially is a residential cityscape, it is necessary to look at independent cinema in Singapore and the presence of the Everyman in Khoo's provocative work.

Understanding Independent Cinema

Holmlund (2005: 2) notes that while the term 'independent film' is hotly debated and not very well-defined, the term 'suggests social engagement and/or aesthetic experimentation – a distinctive visual look, an unusual narrative pattern, a self-reflective style'. Quoting from an article in *Filmmaker* entitled '25 New Faces of Indie Film 2003', Holmlund notes that independent films provide 'alternative points of view, whether they be expressed in experimental approaches or through crowd-pleasing comedies' (2005: 2). He argues that independent films travel from 'margins to mainstream' in terms of distribution and audience. The same can perhaps be said about the content of these films, since they are becoming more popular and accessible to mass audiences. Here Holmlund suggests that '[h]istorically, independent films have offered a "safe haven" for those ignored or neglected by the major studios, among them ethnic, racial, sexual, and political minorities' (2005: 13).

In her paper on independent films of the Chinese diaspora in the United States, Gina Marchetti (2005b: 222-23) suggests that films such as *The Wedding Banquet* (A. Lee 1993), *Double Happiness* (Shum 1994) and *Shopping for Fangs* (Lee & Lin 1997) while 'situate[ing] themselves as American' really deal with the complexities of identity that confront the Chinese diaspora, who identify themselves as belonging to both America and China. Marchetti reads America as being represented in these films by 'issues of concern within North American society, ranging from immigration, labor, class inequities, racism, ethnic exclusionism, sexism, and homophobia' while China, the traditional homeland is represented by "'Chinese-ness" as racial difference, questionable national loyalties, economic expectations, as well as prescribed gender roles, familial obligations, and sexual restrictions' (Marchetti 2005b: 222). She suggests that the content of these films allows Chinese-Americans to both embrace or reject the America and/or China they see being represented in these films, since they are caught within this nexus where 'the nation (China/America) becomes inextricably linked with the body (its gender, its age, its color, its desires) and torn asunder by the strains of the social, the economic, and the political, as well as the personal, vicissitudes of a global culture' (Marchetti 2005b: 223).

In her examination of independent cinema, E. Deidre Pribram (2002) notes that it is influenced by different kinds of film-making practices that include mainstream, avant-garde and experimental. She suggests that while independent cinema attempts to represent 'the world', this realism is problematic. She states that '[p]articular forms of realism are presented

in such a way that they conceal their representative qualities so that they can more convincingly stand in for “the truth” or reality’ (2002: 42). So what is perceived as realistic is perhaps mere hyperbole. In the case of Singapore independent cinema, this hyperbole (social issues concerning the poor) becomes instead a tool for the examination of mainstream issues affecting everyday Singaporeans.

Since a notable trait of independent cinema is its freedom and ability to explore narratives which are otherwise untouched by or dictated by studio (or government) funded projects, independent Singapore films more than rise to the occasion in this context.² A case in point is the disturbing film *I5* (2003) directed by Khoo’s protégé Royston Tan.³ The film was funded by Khoo’s Zhao Wei Films with no obvious financial contribution from any commercial studio or from the government. *I5* caused quite a sensation when it was about to be released as it drew the ire of the Singapore Board of Film Censors for its unbridled narration of a gang of underprivileged teenage boys who turned to petty crime and male prostitution to sustain themselves. The film also won critical acclaim from the local film industry and from the film-going (art-house) public for using real people, that is, non-professional actors who present their lives much like a documentary, to drive the narrative.

While *I5* is arguably a ‘reality’ piece, the camera following the boys in their daily activities, the film inadvertently became even more poignant and marketable when the film-maker was unable to find the stars shortly after its release. The boys had ‘disappeared’ with an eerie fear that they fell victim to ill fate. At the time of writing the boys who would be in their mid to late twenties, have not been found.

Another controversial film of note is Martyn See’s *Singapore Rebel* (2004), a documentary film about Singaporean politician and activist Dr Chee Soon Juan. The Singapore government banned the film and threatened to charge See under the Films Act for violating Section 2(3)(e) due to the political content of the work. Resubmitting his film in 2009 for consideration to the Singapore Board of Censors led to a rethink of what makes political content in films. The eventual result was a number of amendments made to the Films Act itself (Palay 2010; See 2009; Cheney 2009). When Martyn See submitted *Singapore Rebel* for consideration again, he did so on the back of a locally made television show on the ruling People’s Action Party Members of Parliament, produced by the state owned broadcaster MediaCorp. The Singapore government ruled that the MediaCorp television programme was not political but current affairs. This led to industry practitioners seeking clear guidelines regarding what is considered political content. The amendments made to the Films Act that eased restrictions on the promotion of politicians and political parties actually strengthened restrictions on dramatized political productions.

The continued critical successes achieved and inroads made on behalf of the film industry by independent film-makers such as Royston Tan, Martyn See, Eric Khoo and others have no doubt contributed to independent cinema flourishing in Singapore today. Independent film production is indeed alive and well in Singapore. This film industry is organized, with a particularly active online presence in the Singapore film scene. The industry keeps fans, followers and independent film-makers informed through websites such as *Sinema.sg* (2012), started by Nicholas Chee and Randy Ang on 5 October 2006, who describe themselves as ‘the dynamic duo’ behind Originasian Pictures’ *Becoming Royston*. The website was initiated in order to provide ‘a greater voice to all Singapore filmmakers to showcase their work’. In

January 2008, a blog called *SINdie: Singapore Independent Films Only* (2012) dedicated to Singapore independent films was started by Jeremy Sing. Originally called *Actually.Basically.Honestly*, the blog's aim, according to its Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/SINdieOnly/info>), is to 'give a voice to the numerous independent films made in Singapore to get them talked about and remembered' (SINdie 2008).

While independent cinema in Singapore may have a healthy existence because of cutting-edge productions and a loyal fan base appreciative of what this genre of films has to offer, credit needs to be accorded to Eric Khoo, who really was the first film-maker to successfully make waves with local cinema by going public with his signature works that narrate – with artistic licence – the dark and disturbing underbelly of the Singaporean underclass. Khoo's films have attracted the art-house and intellectual audiences in Singapore who, unsurprisingly, are predominantly the English-educated Singaporeans from the middle and upper classes. His films appeal to the silent spectator who is able to both identify with his characters while gazing voyeuristically and from a safe distance into their lives onscreen. The audiences are thus able to objectify the characters and their tragic lives in the narrative while at the same time identifying with the content of his films.

The Darkness of Eric Khoo's Cinema: The Hopeless Everyman and Sleazy Sex

As I have pointed out in Chapter 1, Singapore cinema's hero has historically been the Everyman champion with his everyday challenges.⁴ Singaporean audiences perhaps find more comfort than escapism in being the silent voyeurs to the trials, the tribulations and the triumphs of the Singaporean Everyman. Actor P. Ramlee, for instance, built a career on playing the Everyman. He is popularly remembered by audiences familiar with his work, as well as by film historians, as playing the common man who breaks out into song and dance while negotiating life in a *kampong* of yesteryear. The rush of films that have been emerging since the 'renaissance' of the local film industry in the early 1990s has been marked by the presence of the Everyman, whose heroism is expressed in the ways in which he navigates through life in Singapore. The Everyman is never wealthy, holds no significant standing in Singapore society, usually does not have much education and holds no authoritative or professional position in the workforce. The Everyman does not have grand ambitions that take him above his station, but rather has personal aspirations, such as: fulfilling the prerequisites of Singaporean material success through the acquisition of 'the five Cs' (condo, cash, car, credit card and country club membership) in *Qián Bùgòu Yòng/Money No Enough* (Neo 1998); winning a local football match in *One Leg Kicking* (Koh 2001); surviving basic military training in *Army Daze* (Ong 1996); or falling in love with the right girl in *Forever Fever* (Goei 1998). The Everyman is a figure that is ever-present in Singaporean films, whether they are box office or critical successes.

Generally the Everyman in contemporary Singapore films is the 'heartlander' – a colloquial term describing Singaporeans who live in the heartlands, high-rise public housing estates built by the government's Housing & Development Board (HDB). The HDB runs an owner-lease scheme where Singaporeans purchase a 99-year lease for their flats. Flats are then returned to the HDB as landlord. Since they are public housing, HDB estates tend to support different levels of low and middle-class Singaporeans. Using the HDB landscape as the less than salubrious setting for his films, Khoo takes the Everyman to the depths of bleakness within

the class hierarchy and explores the seedier side of life in Singapore (Sa'at 2012, 45-47). Pathos, in other words, is king.

Khoo's protagonists work within a tortured and hopeless paradigm that they are unable to crawl out of. In Khoo's films, the Everyman has no prospects, is miserable and is confronted with tragedy, sadness, hopelessness and immorality. While Khoo's Everyman attempts to make the best out of life, he really can't, since the cards are often stacked against him due to his sad circumstances. For instance, he may have ill health, such as a terminal illness or a handicap, be suicidal, have no education, have financial and familial burdens, be sexually repressed or just plain unlucky in life. To emphasize the dark hopelessness of his Everyman heroes even further, Khoo injects the themes of sordid and illicit sex as uncomfortable yet necessary devices to drive the narratives of his films.

The narrative of *12 Storeys* is strongly driven by the sexual content of the film.⁵ While there is some visualization of sexual acts, sex in the films is usually implied, assumed or discussed. Moreover, sex is often presented in an exaggerated manner, with sexual repression, sexual frustration, prostitution and sexuality featured prominently in the narratives of the film.⁶ In *12 Storeys*, Meng is sexually repressed but attracted to his promiscuous sister Mei. He seems to revel in discussing sex with her as he relentlessly nags her about how her life will be ruined if she has premarital sex. He makes her promise that she will remain a virgin till she gets married, and he also enjoys playing with a condom he confiscates from her and eventually rapes her towards the end of the film. Meanwhile Ah Gu is sexually frustrated because his Chinese-born wife Lily withholds sex from him.

It seems that sex in Khoo's films acts as much as a force for evil as a force for good. Sexual repression in some characters, for instance, has catastrophic effects for both themselves and for others around them. Meng's repression finally explodes when he rapes his sister Mei. Sex however, is not all diabolical but is also a source of mateship and female empowerment. The frequent talk of sex between the middle-aged men in *12 Storeys* allows them to form bonds through fraternity, while the sexual activities of Mei facilitates her independence as she rebels against her brother Meng's autocratic rule. Withholding sex gives Ah Gu's wife Lily power over her husband who married her under false pretenses.

On the one hand, the sexual content in Khoo's cinema serves as an obvious anchor for discussions of the social realities of the underclass in Singapore. Seedy and over-the-top representations of sex became automatically associated with 'dirtiness' and the underbelly of society. Such presentation of sex functions as a stark contrast to the way Singapore imagines itself – a clean and modern environment that supports a strong middle class with conventional family values. On the other hand, the exaggerated nature of the sexual content of the films also serves as a platform to ease the audience into an allegorical analysis of Singapore as a nation, rather than focusing solely on the plight of the poor. The sex allows a point of entry to challenge the ways in which Singapore – and in particular, the government – has (erroneously) imagined its society to be.

Meng from *12 Storeys*, for instance, can be read as an analogy for the People's Action Party (PAP) government. Meng is young, thinks of the family, and wants to see his siblings succeed in life. He nags at his siblings endlessly while their silent protest is to not listen to him. He is concerned about Mei's virtue and their brother's knowledge of Singapore's

history. Meng's siblings have a discussion about how his autocratic control of them is worse than their mother's nagging. As the younger brother notes: 'at least Ma stops nagging'. From this meta-narrative perspective, the government thinks of the nation (family) and wants to see its citizens (siblings) succeed. It is concerned about the virtue of its citizens, hence the government's interference in the moral corruption and procreation of its citizens. By moral corruption I refer to the government's insistence that Singaporeans lead lives that promote the existence of the nuclear family where procreation is only allowed within the institution of marriage. The government is also interested in instilling a sense of Singaporean history amongst its people and hence resorts to using the formal education system and official public remembering for this purpose. Meng's sexual frustration becomes a metaphor for the uptight Singapore government.



Figure 4.1: Still of sexually repressed Meng chastising his sister Mei for being a loose woman just before he rapes her in *12 Storeys*. From DVD version of the film (Zhao Wei Films and Scorpio East Entertainment 2005)

The presentation of the hopeless Everyman and the hyperbole of sex *12 Storeys* present robust scaffolding that allows for a meta-critical insight into the everyday anxieties of ordinary Singaporeans. The dark pessimism in these films draws attention to the loathing many have for the mainland Chinese migrants, the ethnic cousins of the Singaporean-Chinese majority.

Migrant Loathing: The Mainland Chinese Dilemma

Ah Gu's relationship with his mainland Chinese wife, Lily, depicts a widespread phenomenon regarding Singaporean attitudes towards mainlanders. Singaporeans appear to loathe mainlanders, even though Singaporean-Chinese make up three quarters of the local population and Singapore officially celebrates its Chinese migrant history and validates Chinese culture. The depiction of the unhappy marital union between Ah Gu and Lily, and the presentation of Lily as a vindictively selfish and incredibly sad person highlights a certain dilemma taking place in Singapore. This dilemma sees Singaporeans – including the ethnic Singaporean-Chinese – practise a kind of loathing towards more recent mainland Chinese migrants who reside in the city.



Figure 4.2: Still of Ah Gu and Lily in a scene from *12 Storeys*. From DVD version of the film (Zhao Wei Films and Scorpio East Entertainment 2005).

Ah Gu and Lily are in a loveless and unhappy marriage. They often have fights with each other and it is implied that she is seeing other men. This is because both Ah Gu and Lily got married under false pretences. Before the events in *12 Storeys*, we learn that Ah Gu went to China specifically to find his perfect bride, only to discover her later to be materialistic, disrespectful, unfaithful, rude, insolent and vain. It is no coincidence that these are some of the adjectives Singaporeans heap onto Chinese-born brides. At the same time, Ah Gu's wife admits that she only married him because he fooled her into thinking that he was a wealthy businessman. She feels cheated that he lied to her and that their life together is not really what she had expected. Meanwhile Ah Gu's friends tell him that his wife, like other women from other regional nations who marry Singaporean men, is only interested in permanent residence. Even when Ah Gu and his wife seem to patch things up, his friends are convinced

that once she gains permanent residence she will leave him. Ah Gu's wife, in other words, is the film's femme fatale.

The femme fatale in film is characterized as motivated by money and power on the surface while maintaining a heart of pure evil (Mordden 1988). While we can read Lily as being a kind femme fatale, she is perhaps not that diabolical. Lily may have only married Ah Gu for his perceived wealth but this was in order to make a better life for herself. The femme fatale is also theorized as an 'implacable man-eater' who brings ruin not only to the lives of her lovers but to their dependents as well (Mordden 1988: 7). In *12 Storeys*, Ah Gu suffers at the hands of his wife through her relentless nagging and promiscuity. She also withholds sex from him and denies him what he wants most – children. In order to make her happy, he gives into her demands, such as getting rid of his parents by sending them to an old age home so that she does not have to deal with them. Representing the female mainlander as a woman who feeds off all that Singapore has to offer is a narrative which Singaporean audiences can relate to.

There is local anxiety about mainland Chinese people migrating to Singapore for various reasons such as for work, study and marriage. Even though most Singaporeans are ethnic Chinese or of ethnic Chinese descent, they seem to be suspicious of Chinese people. Singaporeans, regardless of racial or ethnic background, express views both privately and publicly (such as on online blogs, through social media and in forum pages in news dailies) to the effect that mainlanders are not only vulgar, but are pariahs who cause social and economic chaos in Singapore society.⁷

Singaporeans cannot seem to identify with mainlanders, often viewing them with suspicion and paranoia. Mainland Chinese migrants started prominently entering Singapore in the 1990s as 'mail-order brides', unskilled labourers and increasingly as skilled workers. Chinese women particularly have been perceived as gold-diggers with the intent of preying on vulnerable and lonely Singapore men (Seah 2006). Mainland Chinese women are viewed as 'black widows' who entrap Singaporean men for their money and property, running away or murdering them once grabbing hold of their newfound fortunes. The perception that Singaporean men act foolishly and are being brought to ruin by their Chinese-born brides is quite blatantly depicted in the Ah Gu-Lily relationship in *12 Storeys*.

Everyday Singaporeans also complain that the mainlanders are not consciously integrating into Singapore society; interestingly because of language. Singaporeans are concerned that mainlanders are refusing to speak English, the common language amongst Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian Singaporeans, if posts and comments in political Facebook pages such as 'The Temasek Review' (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Temasek-Review/190806675782>) are anything to go by. For instance in a dialogue between young Singaporeans and the government in reaction to the Prime Minister's 2010 National Day Rally speech, grievances about mainlanders took precedence. Young Singaporeans complained about the issue of migrant integration while encouraging government representatives (ministers involved with youth and community development) to reassure them that Singaporeans come first and foremost over these new migrants who are commonly referred to as 'foreigners'.

Singaporeans also accuse the mainland Chinese of taking away jobs from Singaporeans, even though they are primarily employed as bar hostesses in the case of women and as construction labourers in the case of men. This dislike of Chinese people is part of a general fear and suspicion Singaporeans have of both skilled and unskilled migrant workers (Velayutham 2009) – issues which I will discuss in the following chapters. Singapore government leaders, however, have attempted to quell the tensions between Singaporeans and foreign workers, particularly those who are granted permanent residence (C.T. Goh 2008).

With China's burgeoning industrial revolution an increasing number of individuals have become millionaires almost overnight. Entering Singapore with their new money, these nouveau-riche mainlanders have been buying up property and injecting Chinese money into the Singapore economy (Property Wire 2011). However, Singaporeans have expressed discontent online where they consider their presence and money, particularly in the property scene, as unwelcome due to the resultant increase in house prices which makes home ownership for Singaporeans an even more expensive activity. The Singapore government, however, considers the rich or educated mainlanders as 'foreign talent' who contribute positively to the Singaporean economy by frequently telling Singaporeans through ministerial speeches and interviews of their significance and importance in the nation-state. Foreign talent individuals also take up professional positions in Singapore, which again angers Singaporeans who believe they are being denied this employment themselves. A private organization called *Transitioning.Org* (www.transitioning.org) was formed by Singaporean Gilbert Goh in 2011 to specifically help unemployed Singaporeans who lost their jobs to foreigners. Anecdotally, Singaporeans view the government's motives with suspicion and resentment. Singaporeans strongly suspect that the ruling PAP is creating a 'new' electorate of mainlanders who will replace the disgruntled Singaporean public and continue voting the PAP into power.

While mainlanders are increasingly taking up citizenship, many Singaporeans do not consider them fellow citizens even though there have been some high-profile new mainlander permanent residents and citizens. Internationally renowned actress Gong Li and popular Hollywood-Hong Kong action star Jet Li are now Singapore citizens. The government also fast-tracked the permanent resident applications of a number of Chinese table tennis stars so that they could represent Singapore at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The plan paid off, with Feng Tianwei, Li Jiawei and Wang Yuegu winning the silver as part of the women's table tennis team. However, rather than being proud of Singapore's accomplishment – since this was Singapore's first medal after Tan Howe Liang won the silver for weightlifting in 1960 – many Singaporeans were highly critical of the Chinese players, as they felt they were not 'true' Singaporeans and that the Singapore government 'paid' for the medals. Singaporeans also expressed in online forums such as 'The Temasek Review' Facebook Page, the flaw in the plan: the players did not win the gold (e.g. <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Temasek-Review/190806675782>). Similar dissonance was reflected by some Singaporeans online during the 2012 London Olympics when Feng won a bronze for women's table tennis (individual) while Feng, Li and Wang won the bronze for the women's table tennis team event.

It is not only the presence of mainland Chinese migrants that aggravates the locals. Singaporeans currently use online platforms to air their grievances about the influx of new migrants coming into the country as skilled workers. Often becoming permanent residents –

a status which precisely seems to annoy Singaporeans – these new migrants have become the subject of online xenophobic comments.

Xenophobia Online: Local Dislike for Foreign Talent

Everyday Singaporeans, who heavily utilise online technology and identify themselves as netizens (Singaporeans who take to the internet to make commentary), make use of online forums to air their grievances with doing it non-anonymously. The forums in online sites such as the news site *AsiaOne.Com* (<http://www.asiaone.com/A1Home/A1Home.html>) and popular political sites *The Online Citizen: A Community of Singaporeans* (<http://theonlinecitizen.com/>), *Sam's Alfresco Haven: Celebrating Singapore's Golden Period!* (www.sammyboy.com) and *TR Emeritus: The Voice of Singaporeans for Singapore* (<http://www.tremeritus.com/>) formerly known as *The Temasek Review* are well used by contributors and readers alike. Singaporeans use online platforms to express their discomfort with the rapid transformations they see happening around them, much of which is attributed to Singapore's status as a global-city state. These transformations include physical amendments in the landscape, ethnographic shifts in the population and an explosion of 'foreign' cultural practices.

Appendix 1, which I will be referring to in this chapter, provides a small sample of the anger, tension and disillusionment Singaporeans express online in response to opinion pieces, commentaries and reports that directly refer to foreign talent migrants in terms of the ethnographic/societal/cultural changes Singapore encounters as a direct result of their presence in the country and their loyalty to their adopted country as well as to the economic situation of Singaporeans. The posts are responses to opinion pieces taken from *The TR Emeritus* and *The Online Citizen*. The article in *The TR Emeritus* written by 'Grey Hippo' is titled '400000 expats in Singapore living the best of both worlds' appeared on 29 May 2011 while Jen writes a piece called 'Love Singapore, Our Home' which appeared on 2 May 2012.

Two themes are overtly present in the sample of comments: they are xenophobic and incite hatred towards foreign talent migrants, and they express seething rage and disappointment at a government Singaporeans believe has abandoned them in favour of these new émigrés.

Xenophobia Online and Everyday Racisms

Clearly, the posts in Appendix 1 are highly xenophobic with netizens using derogatory terms to describe foreign talent migrants such as 'foreign trash' (e.g. Nation of Idiots, May 20, 2011 and polishapple, 3 May 2012) while accusing them of polluting the environment and of practicing bad hygiene (e.g. 'They stink and smell' by Nation of Idiots, May 20, 'The pungent smell of North India is pervading in Singapore' by Belinda Goh., May 29, 2011 and 'You people are very filthy and very unhygienic. You bastards shit and urinate every where and any where you like' by Raymond Tan, May 20, 2011).

The comments also incite hatred through a fear of self-livelihood. Singaporeans here blame foreign talent migrants of destroying the country by bringing about 'economic genocide' and that 'citizens have no work and will go hungry!!!' (Delay Tactic, May 20, 2011). They further accuse new migrants of not being loyal to Singapore and predict that they will abandon the country once they become wealthy and successful. As fair fare 3 May 2012 laments: 'i loathe to say this but i do not wish to see our country which we all,true lions,love,become filled with ft/pr/new citizens whose only true love for this dearly beloved

country we all help to build is only the MONEY they could harness for themselves at our expense’.

Singaporeans make such xenophobic comments despite the very strict laws in Singapore regarding racial vilification. This is perhaps because Singaporeans do not consider the foreign talent migrants as fellow residents even though they may take up permanent residency or citizenship. Singaporeans instead consider ‘True Singaporeans’ – a term commonly used by netizens online – describes those who can trace their lineage to migrants who came to Singapore when it was still a colony of the British (1819-1963).⁸

While Singapore has strict laws to prevent open communal conflict from taking place, this has not stopped Singaporeans from taking to the internet to air their frustrations; something which the government has allowed to take place without penalty. Moreover, Singaporean internet laws do not converge with the penal code. Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts Dr Yaacob Ibrahim has asked parliament to consider the need for tighter laws regarding racial vilification online. For now, however, Dr Yaacob has requested netizens use common sense when discussing and criticising people from different ethnicities, whether they are Singaporean or not (Chew 2008). In lieu of laws governing racial vilification online, the government has instead elected to educate Singaporeans of the importance of integration with new migrants through the Civics and Moral Education program – a curriculum that runs from primary school to post-secondary education. Singaporean Ministers have also been communicating the significance of foreign talent migrants to the local economy through official speeches. Such speeches, though, have not been well received by Singaporeans who have unsurprisingly taken to online platforms to disagree with their government leaders. An example of this can be seen in Howard Lee’s (2010) opinion piece in *The Online Citizen* on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong’s 2010 National Day Rally and the resultant 75 responses to it. The strong ethnic tensions Singaporeans feel towards the new migrants however, are surprising. Anxiety over the ‘ethnic other’, in other words, has been in existence in Singapore long before the presence of new foreign talent migrants.

Singapore considers itself a multicultural nation as it is made up primarily of Indian, Malay and Chinese diasporic communities together with other minority ethnic communities such as the Eurasians, Arabs and Armenians. Multiculturalism in Singapore, as Barr & Zkrbiš (2008) and Velayutham (2009, 255-273) argue however, is steeped in racism primarily rooted in the dominance of the ethnic Chinese in politics, economy, culture and society. Barr & Zkrbiš, for example, suggest that Singapore has a well-defined hierarchical society that is created not on meritocracy, as claimed by the Singapore government, but through a well-oiled education system that favours and maintains an English-educated but ethnic Chinese elite over and above other racial groups. However, they also point out that while there may be some tension and minor resistance over the status of the elite in Singapore, particularly by ethnic Malays who are indigenous to the region, Singaporeans generally accept and support the maintenance of this hierarchical situation as they do the government. Velayutham’s critique suggests that in Singapore’s multicultural society, racism is practiced on a daily basis right at the grassroots level. While his case study is primarily focused on everyday racism towards ethnic Indians in Singapore, Velayutham also points out that racism is not solely directed from ethnic Chinese to the ethnic minorities (Malays and Indians, for example) but also takes place between the different ethnic minorities.

Government at Fault

Singaporeans have been criticising the PAP government in the private space amongst friends, family members, colleagues and neighbours for decade with discussions often revolving around unpopular PAP policies which many feel have contributed to the rising costs of living and rapid changes in the urban and ethnographic landscape. Ironically these policies mostly are in aid of Singapore's accomplished quest for global-city status. Singaporeans in recent years have taken to social media as a new platform to express their frustrations, anxieties and hurt at the PAP government. Singaporeans who once hid under the covers of self-censorship in the public space by not openly critiquing the PAP for fear of arrest and detention under the Internal Security Act for questioning Singaporean leadership, are now expressing their displeasure for the government openly online and through social media. There is thus arguably a culture of complaint in Singapore, most of the time directed towards the government, its ministers and its policies as Singapore develops further as a modern global city.

Singaporeans, while living in a free market capitalist economy, are now questioning the government in terms of what they consider is the unequal distribution of wealth. They believe that years of hard work and self-sacrifice dictated by the Singapore Shared Values (see Appendix 2) has not resulted in the fruits of their labour. Anecdotally they suspect that this wealth has been held not by industrialists or private business operators but by the PAP government leaders (Members of Parliament and Cabinet Ministers) because of their exceptionally high salaries. The Prime Minister's salary in 2007, for example, was SGD \$3.1 million which was about five times more than the annual salary of the President of the United States of America (Ho 2007). While the PAP has often justified the high salaries of its leaders as a form of anti-corruption and the carrot to attract high caliber people into politics and government, Singaporeans feel that meritocracy in the political realm does not exist. Instead, Singaporeans explicitly state online and anecdotally that the PAP often appoint and anoint future elected Members of Parliament who are pro-PAP and have little to do with ordinary Singaporeans.

Much of the recent Singaporean angst for the government, as this chapter puts forward, is expressed through xenophobic sentiments towards the presence of foreign migrants. Singaporeans fear the perceived impact the migrant presence has on the financial status and quality of life of natural born 'True Singaporean' citizens. The new migrants, in other words, have become an emotive and nationalist proxy for Singaporeans to express their dislike and distaste for the government and its policies.

Singaporeans convincingly express feelings of abandonment (see posts under 'Loyalty to Nation' in particular) and distance from Singapore. Even though they are 'native' Singapore citizens (e.g. F.T.govt, May 29, 2011), they feel 'mistreated in our own 'home'' (Lions 2 May 2012) by both the government as well as the country. As I will explain later in this chapter, Singaporeans have learnt to associate the PAP with Singapore in most part because of government initiated projects meant to instill nationalism in citizens. Singaporeans also complain that they are unable to recognise or identify with Singapore (e.g. Homeless, 3 May, 2012). The increasing numbers of foreign talent migrants have also led Singaporeans to question the government's loyalty to its citizens. Here the posts unashamedly accuse the government of favouring foreign migrants over locals since the PAP 'has sold our children's future away to foreigners' (Homeless, 3 May, 2012). Whether real or imagined, tensions between Singapore-born citizens and foreign talent migrants are brimming.

Singaporeans make use of the foreign talent presence to blame the government for the economic issues they face. For instance, writing on 29 May 2011, Dealay Tactic directly links the presence of foreign talent migrants with the economic issues concerning Singaporeans when they state: 'The employment, housing, healthcare and even ministerial pay issues have the FTs as a major factor for their existence. For example, FTs drive up the GDP artificially, increasing ministerial bonus but not benefitting the ordinary Singaporean'. Likewise for Libran who takes the economic issues affecting Singaporeans one step further when they note that the foreign talent presence affects not only Singaporeans today but Singaporeans of tomorrow. Writing on 2 May 2012 Libran observes:

Singaporeans may not realise it now, but the PAP govt. has sold our children's future away to foreigners. All the 'prosperity' we thought we had were bought by 1) selling a large chunk of Singapore to foreigners, 2) by enslaving our young with 30-year mortgage loans, and 3) by flooding the small country with millions of foreigners. In a small country where we have to jostle with foreigners for everything from public housing to transportation to health care to education to jobs, what pride can we feel? While our PAP politicians enrich themselves with millions while we slave for peanuts?

The cause of the Singaporean woes, in other words, seems to be the government and its policies. The xenophobia Singaporeans express has become *the* issue which Singaporeans latch on to communicate their frustration with the PAP and the decisions it has made that have impacted on the local population.

Conclusion

This chapter begins the discussion of Singaporean anxieties towards new migrants by featuring Eric Khoo's *12 Storeys*' depiction of the unhappy marriage between a Singaporean and his China-born bride. By analyzing the relationship between these two characters as a metaphor for possible reasons as to the Singaporean angst towards Chinese mainland migrants, this chapter provides an illustration of how film is able to capture the dissatisfaction brewing in Singapore with the entry of new migrants. Even though *12 Storeys* was released in 1997, the film effectively foretells current anxieties Singaporeans have not only with Chinese mainlanders but other new migrants who enter Singapore particularly as skilled workers known as foreign talent.

Before the entry of foreign talent migrants and sometime in the early 1980s, Singapore became host to indentured unskilled workers who hold positions as foreign domestic workers and as labourers on construction sites. Since the 1990s and rapidly through the 2000s, there have also been growing numbers of migrant professionals living and working in Singapore that have created anxiety amongst Singaporeans; known as 'foreign talent' these white-collar migrant workers are either on working visas or are permanent residents. Predominantly from India, mainland China and the Philippines, with others coming from Australia, the UK and the US, these two groups of migrants have become the unlikely glue that has bound Singapore-born Singaporeans together. Where there was once a lack of communal integration amongst Singaporeans, this has been put aside in favour of unity through open displeasure towards guest workers and new permanent professional migrants – expressed in the public space in online forums. Such ethnographic transformations and societal responses pose new challenges for Singapore cinema, and in some ways it has been responding to these

changes. The new and changing ethnographic landscape seems to be a far more comfortable subject for Singapore cinema to deal with than the subject of more established Singapore-born ethnic minorities.

Chapter 5

Maid in Singapore: Representing and Consuming Foreign Domestic Workers in Singaporean Cinema *

In 2005, a Singapore horror film narrating the alienation, confusion and fear faced by foreign domestic workers (FDWs) in the island state was released to a more than favourable local reception. *The Maid*, by Kelvin Tong – filmed in the English, Teochew, Mandarin and Tagalog languages – became a local box office success, earning SGD\$700,000 in its opening weekend. Made on a shoestring budget of just SGD\$1.5 million, *The Maid* also won the Asian Award at the 2006 European Fantastic Films Festival Federation for genre and storyline, with the jury also noting that *The Maid* provided ‘a social comment on the issue of foreign labour’ (Tong 2008).¹ However, critics of the English-language newsprint dailies and popular entertainment magazines in Singapore chose not to respond to the film’s social commentary on the difficult conditions faced by thousands of FDWs in Singapore. Instead, they wrote extensively on the horror genre and the need for more Singapore-made films for a hungry local audience. These reviewers included film writers contributing to Singapore’s flagship English-language daily *The Straits Times* (e.g. Loh 2005a: n.p. and 2005b: n.p.), tabloids *The New Paper* (Anon 2005:17) and *TODAY* (Tan 2005: n.p.), and weekly entertainment magazine *8 DAYS* (Wee 2005: n.p.). The lack of engagement with the FDW character and the issues surrounding her employment and well-being could be read to reveal prejudicial attitudes around ethnicity and class that in turn exemplify the attitudes of Singaporean employers and the Singapore government.

As I have mentioned frequently in this book, Singapore art often functions as an allegory for the nation. Singapore cinema often looks at the social issues stemming from Singapore’s transnational position between Western economy and Eastern traditions (Marchetti 2005a). It is this transitional position that creates a bipolar effect where there is economic progress on the one hand, yet disenfranchisement of the disadvantaged, such as the poor and aged, on the other hand. Films by Eric Khoo – *Shier Lou/12 Storeys* (1997) – and Tan Pin Pin’s trilogy of documentaries in particular highlight the plight of disenfranchised Singaporeans. The disenfranchised foreigner is also a figure highlighted in the Singapore art scene (Marchetti 2005a: 330).

The Tales of Three Marias – which made its debut in a Filipino restaurant in Singapore in 2007 – is a groundbreaking play based on the real-life experiences of Filipino FDWs, told in a three-part monologue in Tagalog. In June 2008, the play was staged at a theatre with proceeds going to the Filipino social justice charity Gawad Kalinga. Written, directed and produced by Singapore-based Filipino actor Jay España, after extensive interviews with FDWs in Singapore, the play featured real Filipino domestic workers in the roles, which included Maria Soledad Padua (Doreen Dangca) an abused maid who kills her employer, veteran maid and single mother Maria Dolores Dimarucut (Nenite de Torres) who questions her ethnic and national identities as she wonders if she is a Filipino or an adopted Singaporean, and Maria Corazon Parungao (Rosa Sarador) who aspires to migrate to the United States. Through the three Marias, the play reflects on the complex issues of transient migration in Singapore, such as cross-cultural miscommunication, class hierarchy, racism, human rights violations, victimization,

identities of self complicated by space and place, displacement and globalization. Singapore itself is featured as the unseen yet omnipresent specter that affects the women profoundly, both professionally and personally.

While *The Tales of Three Marias* documents experiences of a community which is not racially, ethnically and culturally similar to any of the other major groups in multiracial Singapore, some of the play's themes run parallel to the experiences early transients and settlers faced at the hands of colonists in Singapore, such as racism and class hierarchy. Likewise, other themes connected to identity are similar to those experienced by Singaporean citizens; Singaporeans are themselves mostly descendants of settlers from the region or themselves first-generation migrants who settled prior to Singapore's independence in 1965. The Singaporean arts scene, the media and online communities often attempt to make sense of national and cultural identities.

The play is perhaps an authentic representation of the Filipino domestic worker since it documents the cross-cultural experiences of real maids in Singapore. However, its accessibility was limited by its language-barrier and a limited number of performances. Although the play was well received critically and within the Filipino community in Singapore, with plans to take it to the Philippines, to date it has only had two public performances.

Not limited to local theatre, FDWs are also present in Singapore films such as *Gone Shopping* (L. L. Wee 2007) and *Mei Man Ren Sheng/Singapore Dreaming* (Goh & Woo 2006). Unlike the Filipino-centred and community-authored maid experiences depicted in *The Tales of Three Marias*, FDWs in many of these films are minor fringe characters who support the principal characters. In *Gone Shopping*, the domestic worker is a young Indonesian FDW in the employment of a wealthy and unpleasant woman (Selena Tan), whose privileged position is enhanced by her maid's presence. However, in *Singapore Dreaming* the domestic worker Pinky (Mariel Reyes), although a minor character, does have a stronger presence in the film. She is a pleasant and obedient Filipino maid who loses her temper when accused of theft by Mrs Mei Teo (Yeo Yann Yann), the principal character in the film. Defending herself, Pinky shows her disgust at her employer Mrs Teo and spits at her after being vindicated of the crime. Pinky's reaction plays a pivotal role in the film, leading Mrs Teo on a journey of self-discovery and self-frustration. Both these films portray foreign maids as minor characters, thus successfully replicating the secondary position of FDWs in Singapore society. They also reveal that FDWs are an accessible commodity for the wealthy (*Gone Shopping*) and even the lower working classes (*Singapore Dreaming*). *The Maid*, however, is the first and only locally made production to date to feature a domestic worker as its protagonist.

The Maid narrates the story of Rosa Dimaano (Alessandra de Rosi), an 18-year-old Filipino girl who enters Singapore for the first time as a domestic worker in the service of Mr and Mrs Teo, a local middle-aged couple (Chen Shucheng and Hong Hui Fang) and their autistic adult son Ah Soon (Benny Soh). The day that she arrives marks the first day of the Yu Lan Festival, popularly known as the Hungry Ghost Festival and the Chinese Seventh Month Festival. The Hungry Ghost Festival is a month-long Chinese pagan festival dedicated to the worship of the dead. It is during this yearly festival that

the gates of hell are believed to be flung open and the dead walk amongst the living. To appease the dead and therefore discourage them from harming the living, and thus provide the assurance of peace and prosperity, believers nourish the ghosts by leaving food for them on the street, giving them offerings by regularly burning fake notes in barrels and entertaining them by staging open-air live Chinese opera shows.² Mr and Mrs Teo are heavily involved in the Hungry Ghost Festival festivities as they are Chinese street opera performers. They are everyday Singaporeans (the Everyman) who place traditional practices of culture, particularly worshiping the dead, as priority – not unlike the people featured in Tan Pin Pin's work discussed in Chapter 3.

Rosa initially gets along well with the Teos. They treat her well and Rosa develops a genuine affection for Ah Soon. However, Rosa is continually haunted by the presence of a multitude of ghosts after breaking several taboos relating to the Hungry Ghost Festival. These include verbalizing the word 'ghost', sweeping away the ash from burnt offerings and sitting in the front row of a Chinese street opera performance, normally reserved for supernatural audiences. One of the ghosts whom Rosa encounters is the Teos' former Filipino maid Esther Santos. Esther was killed exactly a year earlier by Mr and Mrs Teo to prevent her from reporting her rape at the hands of Ah Soon. In a dramatic twist towards the end of the film, Rosa discovers that Ah Soon killed himself soon after finding out about Esther's death. Ah Soon is an apparition that only appears to Rosa and the Teos. The Teos attempt to kill Rosa in order for her to marry Ah Soon in death. It is Ah Soon's ghost who saves Rosa and this results in the deaths of Mr and Mrs Teo. In the film's final moments, Rosa is dropped off at the airport where she is about to leave for the Philippines, coincidentally on the final day of the Hungry Ghost Festival. She takes with her Esther's remains, which she discovered earlier stuffed in a barrel at the Teos. The film ends with the Rosa entering the airport and the reflection of the ghosts of the dead Teos on the sliding glass doors.

Film-maker Kelvin Tong states in interviews (e.g. in Wee 25 August 2004: n.p.) that the purpose of the narrative in *The Maid* is to represent the plight of domestic workers in Singapore. His use of the horror genre can be interpreted as representing the 'horror' of alienation and unexpected dangers faced by FDWs upon entering an unfamiliar country with unfamiliar languages, and a seemingly macabre culture that publicly worships the dead. As a signifier of FDWs in Singapore, Rosa is an Other, as her foreignness is emphasized through nationality, ethnicity, culture and language. As a FDW, a foreign Other, her residential status and rights are limited. The only way she is offered to blend in with the cultural landscape is through a combined process of a ritualistic (and illegal) marriage and (unlawful) death. Marriage to FDWs in Singapore, as I point out later in this chapter, is illegal. With marriage, her Filipino identity would be erased, as she will have to take on the family name of her husband. In death, her foreign identity would be completely erased, as she would not be a living reminder of her Filipino heritage. Perhaps this could explain why at the end of the film Rosa returns to the Philippines with the remains of the murdered Esther. Perhaps death alone does not make the transformation from foreign to local complete.

On one level, *The Maid* can be read as tempering the FDW experience in Singapore when compared to the play *The Tales of Three Marias*. While her employers turn out to be the villains, their actions are not based on typical master-servant hierarchies. Throughout the film, the Teos treat Rosa as they would their own daughter. While

macabre, they see her as the ideal candidate to make their son happy in death, while fulfilling their own desire to see him married. Rosa, however, is not the victim of overt racial or class prejudices. *The Maid*'s presentation of Rosa's domestic worker status in Singapore, in other words, does not parallel the experiences of FDWs in Singapore, although the horror element can function as a metaphor for these experiences. On another level, *The Maid* can well be read as a metaphor for FDWs. Here the Teos' attempt to simply take over Rosa's will and marry her can be seen as representative of the experiences of FDWs in terms of their employers using their existence to their own ends, without consideration for their desires

Although Tong highlighted the plight of domestic workers in Singapore, the critical audience all but ignored the subject of foreign domestic service. Instead, reviewers in the local press chose to comment on the production quality of *The Maid*, Tong's film credentials and the popularity of local cinema amongst Singaporean audiences. Sherwin Loh (2005a and 2005b) and Ong Sor Fern (2005) of *The Straits Times* both commented on the contributions made by *The Maid* as a product of the home-grown entertainment industry in their reviews of the film. Jeanine Tan (2005) of *TODAY* examined *The Maid*'s potential as a Hollywood remake and the promotion of Singapore's film industry to the international market in her report entitled 'Brad Pitt Eyes *The Maid*'. The local film industry also commented on Tong's film-making career, in articles in *The New Paper* (2005) and by Tommy Wee of *8 Days* (2005). The central theme explored by all these writers, however, was limited to their discussion of the Hungry Ghost Festival as the driving force of the film's horror element.

Like the wider audience, the film writer recognizes signs and symbols, codes and conventions in a film. However, the critic's job is to make social comment on films in the public domain. Martin Barker and Thomas Austin (2000) write that a film critic is a person 'who can place a film in a tradition for you, who will tell you about the director, the cinematography, the special effects'. Besides analyzing films, the film critic, they continue, 'will point you to continuities, and offer a sense of the significance of a particular film' (Barker & Austin 2000: 1). Dugald Williamson (1989) further defines the critic as a person who 'performs a certain kind of work on the text, spelling out thematic, narrative, characterological or stylistic patterns, and then treats these as manifestations of some prior creative purpose' (1989: 46). Williamson also notes that the 'effects of meaning produced by using particular techniques of reading and writing are retroactively attributed to an individual origin: this is how author criticism generates textual evidence for the idea of individual vision' (1989: 46). In his interpretation of the relationship between critic and text, he goes on to explain that the critic's role is to 'tell a secret about the artwork, to tease out what the latter does not say for itself, yet to preserve and pore over the precise form of the original words or images which is seen as fraught with meaning' (1989: 47). Williamson points out that the critic can also say something new about the work.

Critics thus are attracted to the film's place in Singapore's burgeoning film industry, and the possible reason for local reviewers' interest in examining *The Maid* within the context of the Singapore film industry lies in the growing popularity of credible local productions that depict familiar aspects of Singapore culture and identity as well as the darker side of Singapore society which includes the (mis)treatment of migrant workers. Singaporean film-makers thus make use of local audience's desire for local flavour in

their cinema. In *The Maid*, the devices that allow local audiences to recognize and identify Singapore culture and identity take the form of the Hungry Ghost Festival and the street opera.

In his extensive study on Chinese street opera, for example, Lee Tong Soon (2002) argues strongly that this form of performance contributes to Singapore's national identity. Chinese opera is a traditional form of entertainment whose importance in Chinese culture is traced back to the third century AD, and it is often performed amongst the Chinese diaspora in Mandarin or Cantonese. Chinese opera heavily influenced the development of Chinese cinema in the early twentieth century but underwent a purging during the Cultural Revolution.

While displays of culture were once considered either private or community concerns in the post-independence era, the 1980s witnessed the state beginning to place more emphasis on cultural heritage (T.S. Lee 2002: 150). Explaining the state's change of approach to community heritage, treating it now as a tenet of Singapore nationalism, Lee states:

[T]he process of cultural nationalism intensified, which evoked issues of ethnic lineage, linguistic uniqueness, religious beliefs and fold traditions among other social practices to affirm a collective national identity. Such a form of nationalism was deemed necessary to counter the perceived negative effects of Westernisation and rapid economic success that had characterised Singapore's growth, such as materialistic orientation, consumerism, political liberalism and individualism, to name a few. Art and cultural programs were instituted to salvage, invent and reinvent local cultures, reaffirm local values, construct a Singaporean and pan-Asian identities, and to align Singapore with the ongoing processes of modernisation and globalisation. In this way, Chinese street opera became an appropriate symbol for the cultural ideal of possessing a strong heritage in a rapidly modernising social space because it embodied the imagery of a rural, simple and rustic local tradition. (2002: 150)

The Chinese street opera thus is a social phenomenon which 'is probably the most representative local heritage in Singapore' (T.S. Lee 2002: 141). Chinese opera performances present more than just 'artistic achievement but an indication of the state of cultural anxiety that has confronted (and continues to challenge) Singapore since its independence in 1965' (T.S. Lee 2002: 140). This 'aesthetic framework', Lee clarifies, 'structures the meanings and values of a Singaporean form of cultural nationalism in its pursuit of national and cosmopolitan identities' (2002: 140).

The local media's lack of critical engagement with the film's social commentary is representative of Singaporean attitudes towards FDWs. While the FDW's concerns are 'invisible' to the Singaporean critical audience who watched the film, she is, ironically, a very visible demographic entity in Singapore.³ This is perhaps linked to her treatment by both Singaporean employers and the Singapore government. Such treatment reveals certain prejudicial attitudes based on ethnicity and class that Singaporean society holds

towards the transient migrants who enter this wealthy city state in droves as domestic servants.

The Foreign Domestic Worker in Singapore: Employer Dissatisfaction and Government Policies

Singapore is a transnational and transitional space which attracts many temporary or transient migrants, particularly unskilled labourers and domestic servants. The entrance of recent migrants, predominantly from other Asian nations, has been a cause for concern amongst Singaporean citizens who either settled in pre-independence Singapore or who trace their lineage back to settlers who arrived when the nation was still a British colony. Discussions in online forums such as those on *Asiaone.com* (Small Press Holdings 2012) and entries in personal weblogs often raise the issue of foreigners in Singapore. Towards the latter half of 2008, for example, the issuing of Singapore permanent residence to Chinese nationals who took part in the Beijing Olympics and the government's plan to create dormitories for unskilled foreign labourers in an upper-middle class neighbourhood became hot topics amongst netizens. Many who aired their opinions on the issuing of permanent residence to the Chinese-born athletes took an anti-foreign stance while crusading for a 'pure' Singapore society. Those who commented on the housing of unskilled foreign workers debated the civil action the residents of the neighbourhood took to prevent this government initiative and the broader question of Singapore's reliance on both unskilled and skilled foreign labour. Post-independence migrants pose a kind of trauma for the citizenry, perhaps caused by Singapore's uneven immigration policy trends which limited both temporary and migrant intake between 1965 to the late 1970s.

FDWs started entering Singapore in the early 1980s when the nation state turned to its regional neighbours for a steady supply of maids to take over the household duties of local women who were joining the workforce in increasing numbers. These transient female migrants often came from developing Asian nations such as the Philippines and Indonesia, with growing numbers coming from Sri Lanka, Myanmar and elsewhere. Today, FDWs have become a common feature in Singaporean households, with one in eight families employing a migrant domestic worker (Ong 2006). Current employment practices of FDWs in Singapore reveal certain social tensions between local employers and transient migrant workers (Ong 2006; Yeoh, Huang & Gonzalez 1999; Rahman 2005; Kaur 2007; Ford & Piper 2006). Often these social tensions are expressed through patronizing and negative comments by local employers. Employers often engage in informal verbal discussions with each other airing their 'problematic' encounters with domestic help, or provide generalized observations on FDW work practices. These comments reveal that the employment practices of FDWs at the hands of their employers are akin to neo-slavery, with scholarship in the area of transient migrant female workers supporting this observation (Ong 2006).

Some Singaporeans have turned to virtual public forums and databases, forming online employer communities to air their grievances about FDWs, or to seek or provide advice on employment practices. Often the Singaporean employers name the country of origin of the FDWs, therefore implying alleged links between perceived bad work practices and nationality. Internet websites dedicated to employer concerns such as *Maidlibrary*

(n.d.) and *Bad Maid Database* (n.d.) unveil a disturbing yet consistent trend of disdain towards FDWs, highlighting tension in the employment practices of FDWs.⁴ Such practices draw attention to the curtailment of individual freedoms of FDWs, particularly highlighted through the surveillance of FDWs by employers and the practice of not according them local civil rights. Posts on *Maidlibrary* and *Bad Maid Database* reveal that employers expect FDWs to be in constant service during waking hours, as breaks are interpreted negatively as laziness. In addition, contributors to these forum sites require FDWs to behave within a certain master-servant framework, emphasizing subservience and obedience to employers. Any deviation from this framework appears to enrage employers. The contempt many Singaporean employers express for their FDWs occurs even as the Singapore government engages in an education campaign on the fair treatment of FDWs. For example, the Ministry of Manpower publishes literature (print and online copies) for employers on the fair treatment of FDWs, such as the *Your Guide for Employing a Foreign Domestic Worker* (n.d.), in English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil.

Maidlibrary and Bad Maid Database

Maidlibrary describes itself as a ‘business dedicated to maid and home-help related services ... [which] seek[s] to provide a convenient channel for employers to browse and select maid biodata’ in its ‘about us’ section (<http://www.maidlibrary.com.sg/>). The website seems to have a dual purpose: functioning as an online search engine for FDWs and as a virtual community of Singaporean employers to air their grievances about their migrant domestic helpers under the heading ‘Community’. The table below shows a breakdown of the threads and posts of each forum in ‘Community’. The description of each subdivision is from the website, reproduced verbatim.

	List of Forums	Threads	Posts	Last Posts as of Jun 19 2008 8:38 am
	ASSOCIATION			
A	United Employers Voice This forum seeks to address pertinent issues in the interests of a united voice for maid employers in Singapore.	45	398	Sept 21 2007 1:45 pm
B	Employers, maids & M.O.M (Ministry of Manpower) What goes beyond fair domestic duties. Views to air with MOM on maid issues, levies and miscellaneous queries. Do post them here.	44	428	Apr 4 2008 7:17 am
C	Maid Agencies – Could be better A fully-moderated forum: posts would be assessed and may be edited for public display suitability. Your posts help the Association chart a future course of action in encouraging better maid agency practices whether by	2	12	Apr 3 2006 10:54 pm

	mediation, or by making your feedback known to the agencies or other employers. We also welcome private posts meant for our filing and action instead of publishing.			
	GENERAL DISCUSSION			
D	Latest Contributions Share anything. The good and the bad. Note: No posts requesting or recommending maid agencies are allowed.	384	3617	Jun 14 2008 11:50 am
E	Starting off, choosing a maid The basics and a touch of the finances involved. Broad categories in maid selection.	84	828	Apr 4 2008 9:29 pm
F	Baby & child Many start employing maids from this time.	28	357	Jun 18 2008 2:48 pm
G	Life with maid – adjustments, concerns, problems Undeniably most life-consuming, day-in and day-out. Realities to get acquainted with.	63	807	Jun 16 2008 11:12 am
H	Be fair to your maid but still in control What is fair to bestow to your maid? How much control should you rein? Calibrate it here with other employers.	48	724	Apr 4 2008 09:39
I	Wayward at home and out It takes two whether at home or not.	19	319	Mar 30 2007 01:04 pm
J	Blacklisted Maids	87	1158	Jun 13 2008 1:40 pm

Figure 5.1: List of forums under ‘Community’ on *Maidlibrary* (<http://www.maidlibrary.com.sg/>).

The above table provides some insight into the discussion activities of users of *Maidlibrary*. The list of forums is categorized into two groups: ‘association’ and ‘general discussion’. The association section deals with issues pertaining to — although not limited to — organizations in Singapore handling FDWs such as the Ministry of Manpower (MOM). MOM is the government department that regulates FDW employment in Singapore and maid agencies. While employment practices of FDWs are discussed under the general discussion section, such issues are also brought up under the association section. The ‘Community’ has a variety of forums on specific aspects of FDW employment practices; with some of the initial posts taking place as early as 2000 (B, D, E, F and H). While some of the forums have been dormant at the time this chapter was written (A, C and I), others are still active (B, D, E, F, G, H and J). Some of the forums experience more traffic (for example D, E and J) than others (for example C). As of 19 June 2008, there were 1787 registered users of the forums on *Maidlibrary*. Users who contribute to the forums have their identities concealed by pseudonyms. There are a few users, however, who seem to use their real names, but there is no way of verifying this. All users in these forums appear mainly to be employers or potential

employers with a very limited number who claim to be potential FDWs looking for employment.

The primary purpose of this forum seems to serve as a database for blacklisting maid agencies and maids. *Maidlibrary* collects this data from the input of its registered users. The criteria for the listing of 'bad' maid agencies are: a) the recommendation of 'bad' maids and b) maid agencies' refusal to exchange or provide refunds for 'bad' maids. Often, 'bad' maids in this forum are defined as 'lazy workers' who do not do as they are told by employers. There are a few posts in 'United Employers Voice' within the site that advocate for an association of employers that protects the rights of employers against 'bad' maids and 'bad' maid agencies.

Maidlibrary community forums also allow for discussions on migrant workers who behave well. However, good behaviour primarily means quietly obeying their employers' instructions to the letter. Any resistance is punished through verbal reprimands or the withdrawal of certain privileges, often related to the use of mobile phones. In other words, only when maids adhere to a master-servant hierarchy, will they then be considered 'good'. Most of the posts in the forum discuss employer difficulties with their FDWs, with some recurring themes. These include accusations of FDWs allegedly lying to their employers, theft, laziness, gluttony, lack of personal hygiene and unkempt appearance, running away, child abuse, possessing mobile phones, socializing with other FDWs in the neighbourhood and clandestine relationships with (often migrant worker) men. Some topics in these forums include:

'Tips on training a new maid'
'Body Odour?'
'Superstitions / Black Magic'
'employer's woe'
'stubborn or dont [*sic*] understand?'
'Maid who tell lies'
'Maid too forgetful or otherwise dont [*sic*] understand'
'Maid using water heater'
'Attitude maid'
'maid sleeping topless'

Unless blacklisting their maids, employers using *Maidlibrary* as a forum do not refer to their FDWs by name. Instead, they 'otherise' their employees often by referring to them as 'girl'. More of a concern in forum discussions, however, is the open practice and encouragement of the idea of FDWs as slaves without civil rights, to be constantly monitored by their employers. The posts expose a desperate need to control the FDWs both professionally and personally, as employers complain about aspects of the personal lives of maids as affecting their professional service.

FDWs have encountered tension with their host country's citizens. In her work on Filipino FDWs in 1990s Hong Kong, Nicole Constable (1997) points out that there were feelings of dislike for Filipino maids by Hong Kong inhabitants, particularly with regard

to their use of public space. Constable provides the example of the weekly Sunday closures of Chater Road by the Hong Kong authorities so as to enable Filipinos to gather and enjoy their day off. This act has generated widespread feelings of discontent among Hong Kong people, as they feel FDWs are accorded more rights than Hong Kong people themselves. Feelings of dislike for FDWs in Singapore, however, can be interpreted as directly rather than indirectly aided by the government. The Singapore government has very strict policies in place when it comes to managing its FDWs.

FDWs are considered transient migrants in Singapore whose employment is determined by a special work permit visa, which is subject to renewal biannually by the Ministry of Manpower. Work permit holders are not eligible for permanent residence. They usually have their activities curtailed and are under surveillance. For instance, FDWs have to undergo biannual sexual health and pregnancy checks. Failing a sexual health check or testing positive for pregnancy, a , maid's work permit is cancelled and they are repatriated within seven days. FDWs are not allowed to marry Singapore citizens or permanent residents unless granted permission by the Controller of Work Passes. According to the First Schedule, Conditions of Work Permit, Part IV, in the Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (Chapter 91A), FDWs are also forbidden by law to 'be involved in any illegal, immoral or undesirable activities, including breaking up families in Singapore' (Ministry of Manpower 2008). The Singapore government's strict policies surrounding FDWs in many ways may serve to promote distrust of these women amongst Singaporean employers.

Conclusion

When the Singapore film *The Maid* was released locally, the production generated a favourable response with audiences and reviewers who wrote for the English-language dailies. While the film touched on the plight of FDWs in Singapore, the critical audience chooses to ignore the social issues surrounding domestic workers in Singapore. The lack of commentary in the Singapore media, however, can be read as revealing certain attitudes Singaporeans have towards FDWs, which are displayed openly in online forums patronized by Singaporean employers and which are confirmed by the government's strict policies governing foreign domestic service. The professional relationship between local employers in Singapore and their FDWs is a master-servant relationship which exposes the active existence of a complex class hierarchy with nationalist and racist overtones. While Singapore is a multiracial society, the government has successfully put into place policies that unify its people under a nationalist umbrella which promotes allegiance to the state and national pride. The government relies on imagining Singapore society and its government-sponsored achievements in a favourable light when compared to other nations and their achievements. The result is a situation where transient migrants outside this racial and historical template are interpreted as posing a threat to Singapore's present multiracial palate. The openly expressed tensions that ostracize the FDW within ethnic and class-based frameworks may well signify an overt form of local nationalism that imagines Singapore above its poorer Asian neighbours in capitalist lifestyle and development.

The following and final chapter rounds up the discussion on ethnic difference and immigrant angst in Singapore by examining the power of the local vernacular Singapore

English (Singlish) as a form of resistance against an authoritarian government and its ability to unite people in this multicultural, multilingual and multiethnic society while at the same time empowering Singaporeans against the perceived migrant threat.

Chapter 6

Singapore English, Singaporean Identity: Unity, Resistance and Empowerment

When I worked in government service in Singapore, a colleague came up to me and asked: ‘Eh, why your England so powderful [*sic*], one? Why you want to speak like dat? I don’t understand your England, lah!’ My colleague was chastizing me for speaking in what he considered to be Queen’s English rather than Singlish (Singapore English). Although my colleague and I got along well, he viewed speaking in ‘good English’ as putting on airs and thus not being part of everyday Singapore society. Moreover, he could not understand how my ‘England was so powderful’ since I am Singaporean born and bred. My colleague was using language not only to find commonality with me but also to feel comfortable with me. Singlish bound my colleague and myself together through a common language particularly since my colleague is an ethnic Chinese Singaporean who often conversed with her family, friends and other colleagues either in the Chinese dialect Hokkien or in Mandarin and I am a Singaporean Eurasian who was raised in an English-speaking household while studying Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language) at school.

I have pointed out in earlier chapters that although Singapore takes pride in its brand of multiculturalism which primarily supports tolerance amongst the key ethnic (Chinese, Malay and Indian) groups in this nation-state, there are still tensions and anxieties that exist. This of course is compounded by the presence of new skilled and unskilled migrants, the majority of whom hail from the countries Singaporeans trace their ancestral homes to such as China. This chapter explores the power of Singlish to not only unite an ethnically disparate population together but also to empower them against this latest threat Singapore society understands it is facing. By looking at the use of Singlish in Singapore films – a vernacular that dominates almost all productions considered to be in the English-language – this chapter analyses the significance and power of this vernacular in Singapore.

Although the Singapore film industry is young compared to other prominent Asian cinemas in Hong Kong, India and China it has generated some very passionate scholarship. Uhde & Uhde (2010) have done a fascinating and comprehensive study of the Singapore film industry with their encyclopedic volume on this cinema, while others such as Chua Beng Huat and Wei-Wei Yeo (2003), Olivia Khoo (2005), Kenneth Paul Tan (2008a, 2010, 2011), Tan See-Kam (2009) and Gina Marchetti (2005a, 2006) have recognized that Singaporean films should be read as significant artefacts that address and attempt to understand Singaporean identity. At the same time, Singapore films also contribute to an understanding of the everyday culture in Singapore. By recognizing the use of Singlish in locally made films, I acknowledge the significance of Singapore films as an accessible and vibrant document of collective cultural identity in Singapore society.

There are not too many English-language films for mass distribution in Singapore theatres.¹ Those that are, however, are not really in the English language – or at least, not in American or British English – but rather in the local dialect of Singlish.² Singlish is the widely if not exclusively spoken form of English used by Singaporeans. It is

perhaps the most identifiable Singaporean characteristic, which encourages and fosters an unofficial nationalist spirit and creates a sense of unity amongst disparate Singaporeans of across ethnic cultures. This is because Singlish plays a significant part in Singaporean cultural identity and national solidarity (Chua & Yeo 2003; Lin & Martin 2005). Singapore-made films tap into the powerful phenomenon that is Singlish.

Local productions such as *Army Daze* (Ong 1996), *Forever Fever* (Goei 1998), *One Leg Kicking* (Koh 2001) and *Talking Cock: The Movie* (C. Goh 2002) rely heavily on Singlish to drive the humour in their narratives in order to become comedic masterpieces. Serious dramas such as *Mei Man Ren Sheng/Singapore Dreaming* (Goh & Woo 2006) and *Gone Shopping* (L. L. Wee 2007), both of which portray an unhappy consumer-driven Singapore society, rely on Singlish as a hook for audiences to relate to the narrative and the characters. Singlish makes believable the themes these films present. The unbridled use of Singlish in Singapore films are not only welcomed but expected, since it mirrors local culture. Singlish in cinematic productions serves to openly provide a public space to not only validate, but also enjoy an aspect of Singaporean identity that the authorities have unsuccessfully attempted to snuff out. It is against this background of linguistic familiarity that this chapter unpacks some of the real or imagined anxieties Singaporeans are confronted with concerning the presence of new migrants by using Singapore films' employment of Singlish as a springboard to discuss not merely the impact this version of English plays as part of Singaporean identity but to also take a look at the complicated relationship the Singaporean people have with the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) government.

Singlish, arguably, functions as a unifying agent for Singaporeans who come from different ethnic and cultural walks of life. It allows Singaporeans to identify with each other and to identify themselves as Singaporean. Singlish however is more than just a tool for unity. Rather it also serves as a form of resistance against an autocratic government since it is a powerful yet non-confrontational devise employed by the masses that has led to unique developments in Singaporean identity. Singlish as I suggest in this chapter, has become a force that Singaporeans generally have used to cope with the unpopular government policy of allowing increasing numbers of new migrants to enter the nation-state because they are perceived to threaten Singapore society and its culture. In particular, Singlish has been drawn upon to combat the perceived threat to lifestyle and job security brought about by increasingly large numbers of new permanent and temporary migrants (Chua 2003b:70). Singlish thus provides Singaporeans with stability in transient Singapore while serving to express a communal identity independent of government.

'We Are All Sin-Gah-Pour-Reans': Unity through Singlish

English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil are the official languages of Singapore although Chinese dialects such as Teowchew, Cantonese and Hainanese, and Indian languages such as Malayalam and Punjabi are also spoken. It is perhaps the only Asian country where most of its citizens are able to converse at some level in English. English is the language of choice in government and in the education system. Since English is such a widely spoken language, many Singaporeans are arguably considered English educated.³ In practice, Singaporeans who communicate in English really do so in Singlish. Singlish

enables people to communicate and identify with each other through a common identifying code of practice.

Singlish is a creolisation of the English language. Using British English as its base, Singlish is built around the various languages (e.g. Malay, Tamil and Bengali) and Chinese dialects (e.g. Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese) of Singapore's multi-ethnic population.⁴ The development of Singlish is not merely the borrowing of vocabulary but also of intonation. Singlish is forever absorbing and evolving, particularly with the global influence of American English, and to a certain degree Australian English, through the importation of media products such as films, television shows and radio programmes. In his entertaining work on the development of the English language in the aptly titled *The Adventure of English: The Biography of a Language*, Melvyn Bragg provides a brief history, summary and prognosis of Singlish as a force for unity, if not disruption, amongst citizens when he writes:

English was used in Singapore for a hundred and fifty years and when it went independent in 1958 [*sic* 1959]. Singapore made it the official language of business and government, partly because English united the diverse population of Chinese, Malays and Indians and partly because of its commercial and financial importance. But alongside official English you also hear Singlish, which grows and develops despite the efforts of the government to root it out. Some scholars believe that Singlish indicates the way in which future Englishes will develop. In so many ways it fits the tongues and the traditions and the vocal rhythms of the people of Singapore much better than official English and could threaten to replace it. (Bragg 2003: 191-92)

Describing Singlish, Bragg continues:

Some words come recognisably from English: 'go stun' – to reverse (maritime 'go to stern'), and 'blur' (confused). But others come from Malay and Hokkun [*sic* Hokkien]. Words such as 'habis' (finished), 'makan' (to eat, meal), 'cheem' (difficult), 'ang mo' (redhead in Hokkun and hence white person), 'kiasu' (very keen, especially of a student). Some of these words are now being used as part of Singapore Standard English and they will change it greatly. Marking plurals and past tenses is a matter of choice and so you get phrases such as 'What happen yesterday?', 'You go where?', 'Got so many car!', 'The house sell already.' The verb 'to be' can be optional. 'She so pretty', 'That one like us', 'Why you so stupid?' These phrases are easily comprehensible to more traditional English users, often full of bite and wit and energy. (Bragg 2003: 192)

Singlish allows Singaporeans of different ethnic, language and even religious backgrounds, who otherwise would have little in common with each other, connect on a common cultural and nationalist platform. It is used in both spoken as well as written communication mediums such as email, Internet forums and social media. The ability for Singlish to incorporate common words from the different communal and dialect

groups is something Singaporeans take incredible pride in.⁵ So popular is Singlish that it has invaded into local entertainment. One of the more popular home-grown songs to capture Singaporeans hearts is the 1991 song ‘Why you so like dat?’ by Kopi Kat Klan and Siva Choy.⁶ ‘Why you so like dat?’ is a local expression which means one or all of the following: ‘What is wrong with you?’, ‘Why are you behaving the way that you do?’ and ‘What is your problem?’ Two Singaporean best-seller Singlish books are *Eh, Goondu!/Hey Stupid!* (1982) and *Lagi Goondu!/More Stupid* (1986) by humour writer Sylvia Toh Paik Choo, later released as an anthology with the title *The Complete Eh, Goondu!* (2010).

Singlish in Singapore Films

Singaporean audiences generally enjoy and appreciate entertainment productions with a strong local flavour. Although locally flavoured performances such as vaudeville and stand-up comedic acts – by such luminaries as cross-dressing comedian Kumar, and Gurmit Singh’s famous alter ego Phua Chu Kang – use crude humour (Kumar) and stereotypical Singapore-specific ideas of the over-the-top behavior of the nouveau riche (Phua Chu Kang) to generate laughter, such gestures are appreciated by Singaporean audiences across class, racial, education and economic divides. While Kumar and Phua Chu Kang are very different kinds of popular comedic acts, the common element is familiarity through local knowledge and, of course, Singlish.⁷ Likewise, Singapore-made films are also in demand for the very same reasons. Needless to say, Singapore films are generously doused with Singlish and always spoken by everyday Singaporeans or as I call them, the Singapore Everyman (see discussion in Chapter 1) as the following examples shows. While not exhaustive, the films *Wo Zai Zheng Fu Bu Men De Ri Zi/Just Follow Law* (Neo 2007), *Xiaohai Bu Ben/I Not Stupid* (Neo 2002), *Army Daze* and *Forever Fever* are indicative of Singlish usage in Singapore films in terms of intonation, non-English vocabulary and broken English.⁸ English translations are in boxed brackets.

Just Follow Law

Just Follow Law is a comedy-drama set in a government department. The title is a pun on the Singlish ‘just follow lor’ which Singaporeans understand as ‘obey instructions without question or argument’. In this scene, protagonist Ah Zui (Gurmit Singh) who is also known as Teng Zui, asks his friend Bamboo (Suhaimi Yusof) for money for piano lessons for his daughter.

Ah Zui: Eh. Afterwards you don’t mind uh? Can you lend me some money or not? Have to settle my daughter’s course fees, hor.

Bamboo: Eh Zui. You go and send your daughter for so many courses for what?

Ah Zui: Eh friend, these courses important one you know. For life one okay. Not like our courses one. Stupid one from the company.

In the following voice-over, narrator Jack Neo describes how the decisions made by Lim Ah Zui’s line managers resulted in him getting into trouble.

Narrator: For VIP visit, upstairs guideline very simple. Those can't show, please hide. Those can't hide, please throw. Those can't throw and can't hide temporarily put outside. And this is how Ah Zui kena sai. [And that is the way in which Ah Zui got into deep shit].

I Not Stupid

I Not Stupid is a Mandarin-Hokkien-English comedy about a group of primary school children coping with the education system in Singapore. In this scene, Mrs Khoo, a well-to-do Singaporean mother – is a thinly veiled caricature of the PAP government – angrily questions her children about their behaviour. Played with much enthusiasm by comedian Selena Khoo, Mrs Khoo yells at her children at the top of her voice while waving a *rotan* (thin bamboo cane used for beating wrongdoers and naughty children). Mrs Khoo confronts her daughter Selena who smells of cigarette smoke, while her son Terry was caught by her in a previous scene working as a server/waiter at the stall of his less well-to-do friend's family hawker centre stall.

Mrs Khoo: How come I can smell smoke on you?!

Selena: I never smoke. My friends blew it on me.

Mrs Khoo: Hmph. And you! How many times I told you not to kapo [be a busybody] other people's business?! Why you go and care about other people who ask you to go and help your friends serve the customer?!

Army Daze

Army Daze is a humorous look at new army recruits as they cope with basic military training. The following scene takes place at a new recruit reporting centre when protagonists Kevin and Ah Beng first meet. Ah Beng is also a colloquial term used to describe young ethnic Chinese men who are uncouth. Often, they are caricatured as sporting lightly coloured hair, driving souped-up Honda Sedans and conversing in Hokkien.

Ah Beng: Sian uh. Si buah sian. [I am so bored.]

Kevin: Hi. Are you reporting this morning?

Ah Beng: Si. [Yes.]

Kevin: Is this the queue?

Ah Beng: Si. Si. Si.

Kevin: Erm. You also came alone uh? My family's gone to err...to Penang. So I had to take a taxi here myself. Anyway, I'm Kenny.

Ah Beng: My name Ah Beng.

Kevin: Ah Beng?! Oh come on. You joking.

Ah Beng: Chua simek? [What's wrong with that?]

Kevin: Really? Your name is really Ah Beng?

Ah Beng: Ah den? [What's it to you?]

Kevin: Oh my god. I'm sorry.

Ah Beng: Sorry for what? Siau! [Crazy!]

Forever Fever

Forever Fever (released in the United States as *That's the Way I Like It*) is a nostalgic comedy set in 1970s Singapore. In the following exchange, Ah Hock (Adrian Pang) is having dinner with his family which includes his younger sister Mui (Pamela Oei) and older brother Leslie (Caleb Goh). Ah Hock and his siblings discuss the newly released Hollywood film *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham 1977)

Ah Hock: Eh Mui. I saw that new Fever show. Wah damn shiok man. [That was a very enjoyable show.]

Mui: I want to see. Chee Kor have you seen it yet? [Elder Brother, have you seen the film yet?]

Leslie: Seen what?

Ah Hock: New Fever show.

Leslie: No. I'm too busy. Haven't seen a film in years.

Ah Hock: Wah. Damn stylo man. [It is a very good film.]

These films did relatively well at the box office. *Army Daze* was the most financially successful Singapore film of its time, earning \$1.6m, while *I Not Stupid* earned \$3.8m. *I Not Stupid* also was the fourth highest grossing film for 2002 (Uhde & Uhde 2010: 321-22). *Forever Fever* was the first Singaporean film to garner international success after it was screened in Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Canada and Great Britain (Uhde & Uhde 2010: 98). *Just Follow Law* earned \$2.8m at the box office even though it was made on a budget of \$1.05m (IMDB n.d.). The film was also nominated for awards at the 2007 Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival and distributed to Malaysia and Brunei (*The Straits Times* 2007).

The success of these films can no doubt be attributed to the strong local content with language playing a significant part in their Singapore reception. Singlish captures the uniqueness of being Singaporean which locals happily identify with and are immensely proud of despite ethnic and cultural differences. Even though Singlish is a slowly evolving language, it is the vernacular that provides the Singaporean majority with a form of stability in a nation undergoing transition.

Singapore: A Nation in Transition

In their reading of nationalism in Singapore cinema, Tan See-Kam and Jeremy Fernando (2006: 75) ask two interesting questions: 'What makes Singapore Singapore?' and 'What makes its cinema distinctively Singaporean?' They rightly note that these are queries that are not easily answered, primarily because Singapore is a nation in transition. While Tan and Fernando note that this transition is made possible by the East-West divide, I suggest that Singapore is divided in other ways connected to its rise as a global city state and the consequences this has on its people.

Singapore is indeed a nation in transition. Singaporeans grapple with an ever-changing Singapore as the city state stampedes into prominence as a global post-industrial nation. It's status as a pragmatic and wealthy global city has left the country frequently transforming itself in the most visible ways. The Singaporean urban landscape has been in frequent transformation in order to accommodate the visions the country has for itself as it rides the wave of globalization.⁹ While Singaporeans are able to deal with the physical changes in their urban environment and applaud the achievements that their nation state has accomplished on the world stage, they are antagonistic to the impact this has had on the ethnographic landscape and the subsequent effects of an increasing population due to a strong presence of foreigners working in the country as professionals and unskilled labourers as constantly expressed in online posts in *The Online Citizen* and *TR Emeritus*, for instance.

A couple of notable consequences of Singapore's progress though are the ever-increasing class and income distinctions. While the Singapore government has been successful in creating a strong middle class, there are also various levels of distinctions within this group. Moreover, Singapore's road to modernity has resulted in a widening income gap among Singaporeans. The Singaporean people thus are generally imagined as divided into two broad and vastly different groups: the urban English-educated 'cosmopolitans' and the 'heartlander' which are terms first introduced by then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (1999). The cosmopolitans are often university educated middle and upper-class professionals or the nouveau riche who are both well-travelled and well groomed. They often live in landed property or condominium complexes. Heartlanders, on the other hand, are the nominally educated, often non-English-speaking middle to lower classes. They live in what is considered the Singapore heartlands public housing estates run by the Housing & Development Board (HDB) – and make up the vast majority of Singaporeans (Sa'at 2012, 42-43). However, the heartlands are themselves changing due to an increasing number of English-educated and well-travelled professional Singaporeans moving into upgraded HDB estates due to land shortage and the high prices of landed properties. HDB estates house about 85 per cent of Singapore's population (*Expat Singapore* 2011).

Class and income distinctions are not the only differences amongst Singaporeans. As I have mentioned, Singapore is a multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual and multifaitn nation. With globalization, the population of Singapore is itself in transition. Many Singaporeans themselves are transnationals, with increasing numbers leaving the homeland temporarily and permanently (Gomes 2009), while the city state is home to rising numbers of both guest workers and permanent migrants. Singapore in flux, however, has led its citizens to hold on tightly to cultural traits such as Singlish that express their unique local identity. Singlish is the language that is the dominant subtext of the collective present in all local English-language media productions.

Singaporean communication through a unique home-grown language is not the result of obvious directives of the government. While rebellion in post-independence Singapore does not use violence or threatening tactics, it occurs in everyday culture through Singlish. This is seen in the everyday use of Singlish which the PAP deems cringe worthy and unsophisticated as Singapore takes its place in a globalized world. Singaporean 'civil disobedience' against the government is not directly political, but has

developed through cultural identifiers which have then transformed into strong signifiers of what it is to be Singaporean.

‘The Pappy Gahmen’ which is Singlish for ‘The PAP Government’: Resistance Through Singlish

Although superficially Singapore seems like a successful government initiative with a well-ordered society, it is a country of people struggling to express their individual, communal and national identities outside of government prescripts. Since the widespread use of the Internet and through the active use of social media, Singaporean society has seemingly been increasingly freeing itself from the self-imposed censorship of public critique of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP), which has been nurtured through years of strong-arm tactics by the PAP and community fears of repercussions for individuals critical of the Party, its leaders and its policies. The PAP, after all, have a reputation for successfully suing individuals and publications for defamation with well-known critics of the ruling party such as J.B. Jeyaretnam made bankrupt and banning or reducing circulation of political magazines such as the *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

Unlike other democracies, Singapore has been ruled by a single party since self-government in 1959 and independence in 1965. It is only after the 2011 General Elections that the opposition took up 6 out of the 87 parliamentary seats available – the highest number of opposition Members of Parliament in the history of Singapore. The PAP is the only government Singaporeans have ever experienced. It is thus a society facing growing pains as it confronts its national identity that is inextricably linked to the PAP government. Nationalism that was once defined not only as loyalty to nation but also as loyalty to the PAP government is now being questioned, openly and prolifically.

Singapore’s leaders however are not enthusiastic about the popularity of Singlish and has criticized those who use and promote its usage (Chua 2003b: 73). Since the late 1990s the government has taken active steps to stamp out Singlish, which the prime ministers of Singapore, no less, have labeled as crude and vulgar (Deterding 2007; Au 2007). Moreover, they believe that Singlish is not a language worthy of a First World nation that holds its own on the global stage, nor an integral part of official Singaporean identity (Au 2007). As part of its strategy to dissuade and actively limit the use of Singlish in the public arena, the government launched the Speak Good English Movement (SGEM) in 2000 to promote the active use of Standard Singapore English. According to its website, SGEM is run by a steering committee comprised of academics and professionals, and with the aim of ‘encourage[ing] Singaporeans to speak grammatically correct English that is universally understood, the Speak Good English Movement works closely with its partners to run events and programmes and develop learning content’ (SGEM 2012).

Taking aim at the media, the government has challenged the use of Singlish in popular locally made English-language television shows. In particular, the government focused on the use of Singlish by the much loved television character Phua Chu Kang from the eponymous television series. During the height of the sitcom’s popularity in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the extensive use of Singlish in *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd* (Teo

and Liang 1996-2007) led to national discussions on the use of Singlish. The Singlish debate centred on both the appropriateness and legitimacy of Singlish usage (Kramer-Dahl 2003; Hoon 2003; L. Wee 2005; Bokhorst-Heng 2005). While the government, educators and some others consider Singlish worthy of cultural cringe, it is still a language that is embraced and widely used by the Singaporean majority. The official concern regarding Singlish is not in sync with the reality of most Singaporeans (Hoon 2003). While Singlish is banned in official communiqué and in classrooms, it is the language that Singaporeans use to communicate with each other at home and in the workplace. The use of Singlish is not limited to verbal communication. Singlish usage has also become popular as a written form of communication in mobile texting, online and on social media platforms. Singlish has thus developed into a soft and non-confrontational form of rebellion that the people use against their government – a government which they also believe has lost touch with the people.

The PAP government has at various times been accused by the general public of being elitist and having very little in common with the voting public. PAP Members of Parliament are highly qualified professionals with university qualifications attained from English-speaking Western countries and converse in good English, however they struggle to communicate with their constituents in languages and dialects other than English or Mandarin. The PAP has been in power since pre-independence as it was elected by the people as its representative when the British declared Singapore self-governing in 1959. It continued to represent Singapore when the island became part of the Federation of Malaya and has been the absolute power in Singapore since independence in 1965. While Singaporeans routinely vote the PAP into government, they are attracted to opposition candidates who are able to converse in popularly spoken dialects.¹⁰ The 1991 general elections, for instance, witnessed the entry of opposition candidate lawyer Low Thia Kiang into Parliament, and he has continued to hold that position.¹¹ Low's appeal is his ability to reach out to, bond and identify with everyday Singaporeans. While Low is genuinely concerned with members of his constituency and known to visit families at the wakes of their loved ones, Low uses language to appeal to his electorate. Low's first constituency was in the precinct of Hougang, which has a high concentration of Singaporeans who identify as Teochews. Many in this electorate also communicate with family and friends in the Teochew dialect, something which Low used to his advantage when he spoke at election rallies. In a way, the (continuous) election and popularity of Low could well indicate a Singapore society that – while practical about supporting the PAP at election time – is attempting to express its own unique Singaporean identity(s) divorced from direct government maneuvering or intervention.

One aspect of the collective Singaporean identity that the PAP has long invested time and energy into is loyalty to the state. To be Singaporean, as constructed by the government, is to openly show love and loyalty to country.¹² The Singapore government – ruled by the PAP – has been incredibly successful in creating a unified national identity amongst its multi-ethnic citizens through diverse official schemes. The campaign to encourage a deep sense of loyalty to Singapore, however, does not stop at country but extends to the government itself (Barr and Skrbis 2008). The government's efforts have successfully resulted in the creation of a unique national cultural trait where the Singaporean collective identity is a nationalist one linked not only to country but arguably to government as well. This is because as I have mentioned in various parts of

this book, the PAP is the only political party and government Singaporeans have ever experienced. It is the only government behind modern Singapore and the only part which features positively and almost exclusively in Singapore's official history. However, Singaporeans seem dissatisfied with the PAP as witnessed in the outcome of the 2011 General Elections. Ironically this disaffection stems from unpopular policies that have contributed to making Singapore the wealthy global city it is today, in particular, the opening up of Singapore to an increasing number of new temporary and permanent migrants.

A Government Project: Forging a National Collective Identity

The PAP government is the only ruling party Singaporeans really know. Singaporeans generally have unconditional respect and admiration for the PAP government and its titular head Lee Kuan Yew whom many attribute as the creators of modern Singapore not only in the interrelated obvious and practical sense of economy, infrastructure and quality of life, but in other ways that intimately affect local social and cultural identity. The PAP has spent time and effort in cultivating a strong sense of nationalism in its disparate population. Nation building has been a priority for the PAP government since Singapore became an independent nation in 1965, with the idea of creating a loyal citizenry connected to Singapore. The PAP has done this through various schemes that include the scripting of a national past that highlights the PAP and Lee as the heroes of Singapore history, the creation of a list of Shared Values (see Appendix 2) with emphasis on hard work and sacrifice for the good of the nation, and the active engagement of young people into various national projects.

Singaporeans are all too familiar with the official narrative of the nation known as The Singapore Story, which traces Singapore from its colonial to postcolonial narrative (Hong & Huang 2008). This familiarity is because the narrative is embedded in the education curriculum, their National Day (Singapore's day of independence commemorated yearly on 9 August) and in public education sites such as museums. The Singapore Story tells the continuing tale of Singapore from its arguable origins as a Malay fishing village acquired by Sir Stamford Raffles of the British East India Company in 1819 to its current status as a financial and industrial powerhouse and global city state. While the British are credited with Singapore's evolution from a mere trading port to a significantly strategic acquisition in the Empire, the PAP and Lee Kuan Yew are portrayed as the most significant contributors to Singapore's unstoppable road to modernity (Hong & Huang 2008; Gomes 2009). It is not surprising that the PAP and Lee Kuan Yew are the heroes of The Singapore Story since both narrative and slogan were first introduced to Singaporeans through Lee since he titled his bestselling 1998 memoir as *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew*. This was followed by a 2000 sequel titled *The Singapore Story: Memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew, Vol. 2: From Third World to First: 1965-2000*. As a cultural construct, The Singapore Story is a term that is purposefully and exclusively linked to Lee's book. The Singapore Story also complements and continues the government's earlier launched education projects aimed at instilling a sense of nationalism through a certain scripted lens which describes Singapore's history as the history of the ruling People's Action Party. These include teaching Singapore history as part of the Social Studies program in secondary schools and through the National Education public campaigns. When first launched in 1997, the National Education campaign involved making civil service employees and students

visit specially constructed exhibitions highlighting the official government interpretation of Singapore's past.

The Singapore government has created a loyal and unstoppable workforce cultivated through the promotion of hard work and self-sacrifice for nation, as enshrined in the Singapore Shared Values doctrine. This doctrine serves as the official ethos of Singapore society. Its success arises out of the government's adoption of selected tenets of Confucian Chinese culture which other ethnic groups are also able to identify with, namely the importance of respecting the family and upholding family values. While Confucian Chinese culture highlights obedience to the family hierarchy, Singapore's interpretation replaces family with nation and government (Gomes 2009). Non-Chinese ethnicities in Singapore would not find extending the paradigms of family much of a stretch, since community relations are emphasized strongly in other ethnic groups such as the Malays.





Figure 6.1: Commemorative art work depicting Singapore's colonial history with emphasis on racial harmony and the hardwork of pioneering migrants features prominently in the Central Business District. The sculptures above are found along the Singapore River – the centre of trade in the 19th and early 20th centuries of colonial Singapore and the first area to be developed as a township in the first few decades after Sir Stamford Raffles acquired Singapore for the British in 1819. Photos courtesy of the author, 2008.

Although the Singapore government actively engages in selective aspects of Confucian Chinese culture as a model for its official value system, there are other aspects which it adapts accordingly. While Confucian Chinese culture gives reverence to the elderly, Singapore places great emphasis on the young, who the government calls 'the next generation' which has become part of Singapore's everyday discourse. To inculcate a strong sense of nationalism in young Singaporeans, the government has embarked on projects that make new generations of Singaporeans believe they are responsible for the future of the country. This is because Singapore leaders have long believed that Singapore's only resource is its people.

Singaporeans are indoctrinated with The Singapore Story through the formal education system (e.g. the Social Studies program taught in all secondary schools) and public education (e.g. memorials, museums and commemorative exhibitions and events). Singaporeans born after 1965 have not known any other ruling party, so the government has found it easier to engage young people in its nationalist pro-government projects. These include recruiting young people, usually under the age of 35, to actively participate in government sponsored activities, mentoring young university graduates who enter the civil service, and encouraging young people to respond positively to various government policies for the good of Singapore, such as procreation to increase the nation's population.¹³

The government also targets teenagers in their campaigns to cultivate allegiance to state and administration. The youth are strongly encouraged to take on responsibilities that emphasize loyalty to the nation, even in their leisure time. These activities include volunteering to take on the role of enthusiastic spectators in the 2010 Youth Olympic Games. The Ministry of Community Development, Youth & Sports (MCYS) – the parent ministry that oversaw Singapore’s successful bid for the first Summer Youth Olympic Games and its organization and implementation through the Singapore Youth Olympic Games Organising Committee (SYOGOC) – attempted to drum up nationalist support, enthusiasm and momentum for the games by promoting the Singapore games ethos to secondary students through various modes, including the Wikipedia entry ‘2010 Summer Youth Olympics’ (Wikipedia 2012).

The Singapore government, aware that there are a number of Singaporeans who live, work and study overseas, is always adept at creating schemes and events to entice Singaporean expatriates back to the homeland. The aim of enticing Singaporeans back to their homeland is to have them build and work on the various modernization projects the nation engages in. In order to encourage young expatriates with who have weak ties to Singapore, the Singapore National Youth Council (NYC) has devised a grant to attract these Singaporeans back to the homeland through its ‘Young ChangeMakers’ programme. According to the NYC website (<http://ycm.nyc.sg/young-changemakers-ycm-grant/os-ycm-grant>), the grant

aims to provide seed funding for short term community projects that will engage our Overseas Singaporean Diaspora and encourage them to actively reach out and connect with their peers (living abroad and/or in Singapore), contribute to the local communities they live in, and help promote Singapore as a great city to live, work and play in. (NYC 2010)

The grant is worth \$3000 to cover direct costs for the project. However, the NYC will provide resources and support from a pool of mentors. Projects that are funded will ‘benefit the Overseas Singaporean community and/or the local community in the host country’ and ‘the core activities of the project should be carried out overseas’. The Young ChangeMakers programme thus is another way in which to instill a strong sense of loyalty to Singapore and the Singapore government amongst young overseas Singaporeans. Overseas Singaporeans who are eligible to apply must be between 13 and 25 years in age and can apply as individuals, youth groups or organizations. When Singaporeans become working adults, the government has other schemes to aid their national allegiance.

The public service is Singapore’s largest employer, employing around 127,000 officers across fifteen ministries and in more than fifty statutory boards (Prime Minister’s Office 2007). As Singapore’s largest employer, it actively recruits fresh university graduates who receive their degrees from both local and overseas tertiary institutions. Once recruited these fresh graduates are mentored by more senior members of the government department they work in, where loyalty to Singapore and to the government are emphasized. Standout young employees who are identified as complying with the department’s organizational goals are sometimes given opportunities such as

scholarships for approved postgraduate courses. While these scholarships ensure they are bonded to the parent ministry or statutory board, their accelerated promotion through the public service ensures the continuation of the loyalty cycle.

For the past three decades, the Singapore government has been strongly encouraging young university-educated Singaporeans to marry and procreate through various methods that include setting up a national matchmaking agency, tax incentives, housing schemes and, of course, strongly worded government messages that emphasize national duty through procreation.¹⁴ The Singapore government has often reminded Singaporeans that since the city state's only resource is its people, Singaporeans have a national duty to procreate in order to make sure that there is a continuous supply of workers to feed the economic needs of the nation. The latest reminder took place just after Singapore's National Day in 2012 by Lee Kwan Yee himself (Ramesh 2012). The projected number of people the government aims Singapore to reach is 6.9 million by 2013. Singapore is almost reaching that figure. As of June 2014, the island supports 5.47 million people (Tham 2014).

While matchmaking Singaporeans with each other has been reasonably successful, the projected goal of procreation through such unions has not. Singapore has been incredibly anxious about this and has attempted to meet population shortfalls by opening its borders to temporary and permanent blue-collar and white-collar migrant workers from the region (the Philippines, mainland China and South Asia for instance) and beyond. Blue-collar workers, or transitional migrants, are usually unskilled labourers known as guest workers, foreign workers and work permit holders. White-collar workers are professionals often in management positions and hold university degrees, colloquially known as 'foreign talent' as mentioned in Chapter 1.¹⁵ Foreign talent migrants usually become permanent residents. Out of the 5.47 million people in Singapore, 3.87 million are Singaporean and permanent residents, while 1.6 million are non-resident migrants (Tham 2014). Unfortunately the move to allow these new white-collar migrants to enter Singapore has caused huge dissatisfaction with the government amongst its citizens as seen by the huge amounts of online criticism towards the government regarding this particular issue.

Standing up to the Paternalistic PAP Government – Unity because of New Migrants

While the PAP government has been proactive in creating a Singaporean identity that is nationalist in terms of loyalty to state as well as to government, this success has been mixed. The Singapore public generally acknowledges that the PAP gave Singapore economic prosperity, created jobs for Singaporeans, allowed Singaporeans to own their own homes through the Housing & Development Board (HDB) lease-ownership scheme, gave young Singaporeans compulsory education and created an effective health system. In 2010, Boston Consulting Group listed Singapore as number one in the millionaire household club, with 11.4 per cent of its 4.7 million population at this time in this category (Hutheasing 2010). In 2011, *The Straits Times* reported that the number of millionaires in Singapore are expected to grow from 183,000 to 408,000 by 2016 (Ng 2011). Credit to which is largely given to the PAP. While appreciative of the government's success in fast-tracking Singapore into the twenty-first century, many

Singaporeans feel this has come at a price. As suggested in previous chapters, many resent the government for unpopular policies that have led to an ever increasing influx of new migrants which they consider disadvantageous towards Singaporeans. Even though Singaporeans are mostly loyal to the PAP, as seen through the population's continuous voting in of the party at the general elections, Singaporeans are also incredibly critical of the government and its policies and have developed a unique national culture that thrives on rebelling against what they consider the elitist and authoritarian PAP.

Empowerment through Singlish

Singapore, like any developed country whose borders have become porous due to globalization, has had an increase in the number of transitional and permanent migrants working and living within its geographical boundaries. Unskilled or semi-skilled foreign workers often take up positions such as the lower end of the hospitality industry, the cleaning industry and the transport industry (bus drivers and taxi drivers). However, these workers are not allowed permanent residency. As I point out in previous chapters, work permit holders who are unskilled workers (foreign domestic workers and construction workers) have been coming into Singapore since the 1980s when the country embarked on its numerous modernity projects. With their arrival came voices of dissatisfaction from Singaporean residents who felt that their ethnographic landscape was being overrun by poorly educated, unskilled and 'low-class' non-Singaporean Asians. This class hierarchy between Singaporeans and work permit holders is given credence by government labour policies and the already strong negative attitudes Singaporeans have towards temporary migrants.

Transient workers such as female domestic workers and unskilled labourers from various Asian nations have been a common sight in Singapore for the past three decades. Singaporeans have learnt to live with transient migrants, although begrudgingly so. A good example is the anger Serangoon Garden residents felt when a former secondary school was turned into a dormitory for unskilled Asian labourers. Residents of upper-middle-class Serangoon Garden attempted, unsuccessfully, to block the government's plan through petitions (Forss 2008). Many Singaporeans have also become increasingly disillusioned with the decisions of the government concerning the influx of foreign talent whom they believe are taking jobs away from citizens (Chua 2003b:70). Singaporeans accuse foreign talent migrants of enjoying the benefits of permanent residence and citizenship, which they feel only 'true Singaporeans' (Png 2003) should enjoy. Such comments can be seen in online forums such as those in political websites such as *The Online Citizen* and *TR Emeritus*. Of course not all Singaporeans think this way. Singapore society is ethnically and culturally diverse so there will also be pockets of Singaporeans who think and function outside the mainstream.

The dislike Singaporeans feel towards foreign talent migrants meanwhile has been attributed to the government's highly unpopular foreign talent migration policy. It was this policy that became a key issue in the 2011 general elections, which resulted in the PAP receiving the lowest percentage of the popular vote since elections were first held in 1959.¹⁶ Singaporeans complain that the huge rise in foreign talent migrants has caused a spike in the income gap, which they claim favours the new foreign talent

migrants. Singaporeans have expressed overwhelmingly in online forums and social media that they are being left behind and abandoned by the government that they have voted into power for close to fifty years. The increasing numbers of foreign talent migrants have led many Singaporeans to question the government's loyalty to its citizens online in the political websites (e.g. *The Online Citizen*), news websites (e.g. *Asiaone.Com*) and social media (e.g. Facebook posts on personal and group pages). Many read the government's foreign talent migration policy as a way in which the PAP keeps itself in power by recruiting a new loyal electorate.

Others have been voicing their fear that the PAP would grant permanent residents voter rights and thus keep the ruling party in power indefinitely. Singapore-born citizens thus feel that they are being replaced by a pro-PAP electorate made up of educated professional foreigners principally from India, China and the Philippines. Such sentiments are fuelled by foreign talent migrants who express, privately as well as publicly online and in social media, their respect for the PAP and all it has done for Singapore. Whether real or imagined, tensions between Singapore-born citizens and foreign talent migrants are increasing.

While Singaporeans are unable to do very much to change the ethnographic landscape of their country due to the new migrant workers, they are expressing their Singaporean cultural identity and collective solidarity through language. Singaporean citizens take issue with new migrants for not attempting to fit in primarily because of language barriers. Many Singaporeans feel that English and even Malay helps bridge the gap between the main racial groups in Singapore. Older Singaporeans, regardless of whether they are Chinese, Indian, Malay or Eurasian, converse cross-culturally through the use of basic Malay, and this is also the language of choice between employers and their Indonesian domestic workers.

Yet Singaporeans often warm to new migrants if they adopt Singlish, for instance. In 2010, RazorTV – a segment in the online version of the nation's flagship English-language newspaper *The Straits Times* – featured the Singlish talents of an American teenager living and studying in Singapore. The teenager's ability to speak Singlish was very well received by the presenters of the segment who felt that he had mastered the art of Singlish. In the same year, RazorTV featured a segment on foreign students studying at the Singapore Management University (SMU) who were adapting to Singapore by learning Singlish. The segment painted these students in a positive light because they were making efforts to blend into Singapore culture by communicating in Singlish.¹⁷

PAP sees the light: Educating Migrants about Singapore through Singlish

Realizing the role Singlish can play in easing tensions and sensing the seething anger the population have towards new migrants, and towards the PAP, the government has recently embraced Singapore English as part of its campaign to 'educate' foreign talent migrants, as well as foreign students enrolled in Singapore institutions, about local culture. In 2010, PM Lee Hsien Loong referred to a locally produced guidebook for international students in Singapore known as *Singapore Shiok!* (Singapore Management University 2010) during his National Day Rally. *Shiok* is Singlish for 'feel good'. While initially only an SMU guidebook, following the campaign it became a 'must

have' for new migrants to learn how to integrate and assimilate into Singapore society. By doing so, PM Lee placed localism as a pivotal tool for integration. The campaign strongly encourages new migrants in Singapore to embrace Singlish and the multi-tiered and complex local discourse that accompanies it. However, while this seems to be the intention of the government, the active encouragement of Singlish is a thinly-veiled campaign to convince Singaporeans who trace their ancestral roots to the era of colonialism that they still indeed matter. The primary theme of the 2010 Singapore National Day celebrations was the integration of new migrants into Singapore society and culture, with the National Day Rally speech (a platform for the government to outline its 2010-2011 policies) and a number of focus groups chaired by cabinet ministers organized to 'allow' Singaporeans to air their grievances.

Conclusion

Singlish functions as a useful type of cement that binds disparate Singaporeans with each other while acting as an unconventional shield and offensive strategy against an authoritarian government and its more unpopular policies. It is an unconscious collective expression of civil disobedience, which Singaporeans – as well as the local film industry – have come to realize is incredibly powerful. Singlish has also become the unifying force Singaporeans have used to express their unhappiness against government policies pertaining particularly to the increasing number of migrants – both unskilled and white collar – whom locals feel are not only overpopulating the society but also diluting Singaporean culture. This chapter as well as with previous ones examining Singaporean attitudes towards new migrants have shown that this 'foreign' presence has become the unlikely glue that has brought this disparate population together.

Conclusion

*I will always recall the city
Know every street and shore
Sail down the river which brings us life
Winding through my Singapore*

*This is home truly, where I know I must be
Where my dreams wait for me, where the river always flows
This is home surely, as my senses tell me
This is where I won't be alone, for this is where I know it's home*
'Home' (D. Lee 1998)

In this book I have put forward the idea that even though Singapore projects itself as supporting a harmonious multicultural society, a survey of local cinematographic representations of ethnicity and migration puts this claim into question. Yet, the anxiety over new migrants has assisted Singaporeans in finding common ground and unity with each other. By examining some key films of prominent film-makers across the commercial and independent film-making spectrum in Singapore, I have used film as a lens to view, unpack and analyze multicultural Singapore society's anxieties towards ethnicity and migration. By employing the topics of identity, memory and place, I have used the accessible art form of film to scratch below the surface of this seemingly well-ordered bureaucratic nation. Singapore-made films are able to provide a window to understanding the Singaporean people primarily because they seem to embrace and promote the everyday Singaporean. The films I used in this book have been particularly useful in aiding my investigation into the ways in which Singapore society deals with both the ethnic other and self, and quotidian encounters with new migrants.

On the surface, Singapore's brand of multiculturalism works well. Here is a country with no ethnic clashes even though the population is comprised of three major ethnic groups: the Chinese, the Malays and the Indians. These ethnic groups are able to coexist primarily because of the government's putting in place strict laws governing racial tolerance and policies celebrating cultural and religious diversity among these groups. Scratching below the surface, however, anxieties regarding identity exist particularly when the Chinese-Malay-Indian (CMI) is muddled because of globalization and intermarriage, thus creating people and communities that while are connected to the CMI nexus, exist outside it. For the purpose of this book, I refer to people who are biracial (children whose parents come from different ethnic groups which may or may not be from CMI) and Eurasians (community whose heritage is based on European-Asian pairings during various colonial periods in Singapore and Malaysia). While Singapore is strongly dominated by the ethnic Chinese, the issue of identity is no less an issue for this community as it navigates traditional culture and religious practice through the challenges of an ever modernizing Singapore. Whilst multicultural Singapore copes with the internal contestations connected with the discomfort and confusion associated with ethnicity, the society is currently facing perhaps its most challenging test yet – the

entry of new migrants. Singaporean antagonism towards the presence of new migrants is particularly noteworthy since Singapore itself is a settler society whose citizens clearly trace their ancestral homes to the very countries the new migrants hail. However, as I have argued in this book, it is this very foreign presence that has emerged as a force uniting Singaporeans together.

Since gaining independence the country has been rapidly undergoing physical changes as part of its journey towards modernity with almost every significant part of Singapore utilized for the purpose of industrial or residential use. The physical and geographical transformations that Singapore has undergone because of improvements to infrastructure, altering skylines and land reclamation for the purpose of extending the Singapore coastline, are sights which Singaporeans have grown accustomed to. While Singaporeans take modifications to their country's facade in their stride, it is the transformation of the ethnographic landscape due to the presence of new transitional and permanent migrants that has distressed Singaporeans. Locals believe that these new migrants, colloquially referred to as 'foreigners' even though many have permanent residence and citizenship, are responsible for the cultural changes they see facing Singapore society. So while many Singaporeans can identify with the 'Home' quoted at the beginning of this chapter, they are also attempting to make sense of their significance and place in their homeland, which through government policy on new migrants, they feel, has abandoned them. 'Home' was sanctioned by the government as part of Singapore's 1998 National Day celebrations and remains a very popular nationalist song.

Singapore today is no doubt a country strongly shaped by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). While the PAP have no doubt played a dominant role in building Singapore into the global economy, financial centre and First World nation it is today, the ruling party also contributed significantly to the development of the Singaporean people. The PAP created a citizenry loyal not only to country but to the political party itself through intensive national campaigns and education. However, for a variety of reasons, the past decade has seen Singaporeans publicly vocalize their discontentment with a government that has been very much part of Singapore's identity, particularly through online platforms.

This book has shown that many Singaporeans are obsessing and crying foul about any issue concerning migrants living and working in Singapore. This is because they feel increasingly swamped by the presence particularly of mainland Chinese, South Asian and Filipino permanent and temporary migrants whom they see as cheaper labour alternatives and as polluters of the social fabric and cultural landscape of Singapore. Singaporeans have taken to targeting and protesting against individual migrants in online forums and social media platforms. However, instead of targeting individuals who have political and economic influence, power, wealth and control, Singaporeans protest against individuals who have none of these traits. In August 2011 Filipino Rachel Beguia, an administrative clerk at a hospital, was targeted by online and social media users such as those on *TR Emeritus* (<http://www.tremeritus.com/2011/08/11/pinoy-ft-jumps-to-defence-of-malaysian-mp-penny-low-and-hurls-insults-at-singaporeans/>) for 'anti-Singaporean' comments about national servicemen and the work attitude of Singaporeans that she made while defending PAP Member of Parliament Penny Low on the latter's Facebook page. Singaporean netizens took Beguia to task and asked her employer – the National Heart

Centre – to investigate. Some online commentators even called for her resignation. As the saga unfolded, her Singapore-born husband Gay Chao Hui publicly admitted that it was he and not she who posted the comments.¹⁸ On 8 December 2013 the unthinkable happened – Singapore had its first riot since the race riots of 1964. The incident which saw 300 migrant labourers from Bangladesh and Tamil Nadu damage vehicles and set an ambulance on fire, happened in Little India and instigated by a fatal accident in which a private bus hit an Indian construction worker. Netizens took to social media to express their shock that such a thing could happen in ‘peaceful’ Singapore while taking the opportunity to once again point out the ills of having too many foreigners in the country (Barimen 2013).

Singaporeans have been expressing their anger at the Singapore government in relation to its migration policy in droves on online and social media platforms. The gist of their discourse lies in their belief that the PAP government have forsaken and neglected them in favour of these new migrants. The resulting effect is a Singapore society that is becoming more politically active. Singaporeans are now valuing their freedom of speech and openly criticizing the government in organized public, face-to-face and online forums. The biggest show of political might by a formerly conservative and apathetic citizenry was demonstrated during the 2011 Singapore general elections (GE). This was followed in the first well attended organized protest independent Singapore had seen on 16 February 2013 to the newly parliamentary endorsed *Population White Paper: A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore* which estimated the number of people to rise to 6.9 million by 2030 through immigration (the granting of 15,000 and 25,000 new citizens and 30,000 permanent resident permits annually). An estimated 5000 people attended the protest organized through Facebook by Gilbert Goh, the founder of Transitioning.Org, an organization set up to help unemployed Singaporeans who lost their jobs to foreign talent migrants (Ramesh 2013). At the same time, the presence of these new migrants has galvanized Singaporeans to each other. For instance, while I referred to language playing a part in bringing Singaporeans together in Chapter 6, this is not the only cultural trait that gives Singaporeans a collective identity that also empowers. In Chapter 2 I mentioned that besides Singlish, food is a cultural trait that is very much Singaporean. Food is also something which provides a coping mechanism when dealing with new migrants as seen in the citizen-organized curry sharing campaign.

In 2011 a Facebook campaign to ‘Cook and Share a Pot of Curry’ on Sunday 21 August was launched in protest against foreign talent migrants – and to a greater extent even temporary migrants – for their inability to accept Singaporean multiculturalism (Suhartono 2011). The campaign attracted tens of thousands of Singaporeans both in Singapore and overseas to commit to cooking and sharing curry with friends and neighbours. The event came about because of a newspaper on a local residential council’s arbitration in a case involving a foreign talent migrant family from Mainland China and their ethnic Indian Singaporean neighbours. Both families live in a block of flats that are part of the government controlled Housing and Development Board scheme. The Mainland Chinese family complained that they were offended by the smell of curry emanating from their neighbour’s flat. As part of the mediation process, the Singaporean family agreed to cook curry only on days their Mainland Chinese neighbours were not at home – a decision that angered Singaporeans since they felt that cultural adaptation and acculturation should be the responsibility of new migrants and not locals. While the campaign targeted new permanent and transitional migrants living

in Singapore, it was also meant to send a message to the government for not only siding with the Mainland Chinese family but also for allowing so many foreigners into the country to live, work and study. As blogger Singapore Actually, writing in 2011, observes:

I couldn't help but be annoyed by this story about the Indian Singaporeans who had to stop cooking curry when their neighbours who are from China, were at home, because they didn't like the smell of curry. If the Indian family does not adhere to this, they can be sued in court. The first thought that came to my mind.... 'What the heck?!' I am shocked that such a request was even entertained by the mediation centre. The solution just seems unfair to me. When you're a guest in another person's home country, you wouldn't ask them to stop their cultural practices that are the norm of that country, would you? I find the situation and solution proposed by the mediator highly insensitive. And what kind of precedence is being set? It is this kind of thing that upsets locals and causes unnecessary friction....

The Singapore government has begrudgingly decreased its foreign talent intake while putting into policy hiring practices that favour locals over foreigners. In a BBC online report on the increasing discontent among Singaporeans, Southeast Asian correspondent Jonathan Head (2013) clearly alludes to the change in government tactic when he comments:

In a statement to the BBC a government spokesman re-iterated the long-standing belief, that as a small, open economy, Singapore must remain open and connected, for trade or talent flows. But, the statement said, 'we are deliberately slowing our foreign workforce growth rate. This will also slow economic growth, but it is a compromise we need to make to continue to give Singaporeans a high quality of life'.

In September 2014 *The Straits Times* reported that the foreign worker population growth rate had decreased from 4 per cent in 2013 to the current 2.9 per cent.

Perhaps as a fitting end to this book I bring the focus back to Singapore films. So far there have been few films that feature new migrants. Those that do feature new migrants as being unsuccessful and bitter when failing to find a good life in Singapore as in *Shier Lou/12 Storeys*, portray 'foreign talent' migrants as untalented and uncreative as in *Xiaohai bu ben/I Not Stupid* (Neo 2002) and paint a somewhat sympathetic portrait of foreign domestic workers as in *The Maid*. With Singapore's population increasingly being populated by new migrants, will Singapore films continue representing Singaporeans and their concerns, and thus transform into an advocate for 'true Singaporeans' over and above new migrants? Here, could Singapore films' representation of the angst people feel about the government and new migrants lead to social unrest, dissent or perhaps violence in this otherwise ordered, manicured and well-oiled nation? Also, with Singapore's ethnic diversity outside the Chinese-Malay-Indian nexus, will depictions of the 'true Singaporean' be widened to include mixed ethnicities and will they be the offspring of Singaporean encounters with new migrants or second generation Singaporeans? Or will Singapore films be an advocate for these 'foreigners'

living and working in the country? Questions that go beyond the context of film and apply to Singapore society itself.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Sample of comments on *The Temasek Review Emeritus* in response to the post ‘400000 expats in Singapore living the best of both worlds’ by Grey Hippo.

Article/Source	Foreign Talent Migrants		Economic Situation of Singaporeans
	Ethnographic Concerns	Loyalty to Nation	
<p>Grey Hippo, ‘400000 expats in Singapore living the best of both worlds’, The TR Emeritus, 29 May 2011.</p> <p>At the time of writing, there were 281 responses to the article, which was within 2 days after the article was published.</p>	<p>Nation of Idiots, May 29, 2011 at 11:57 am: ‘PAPPIES LOOK HERE - Now that we have so much Foreign TRASH and Permanent RUBBISH, it is about time for a ‘CLEAN UP SINGAPORE CAMPAIGN?’ I am sure we are more than happy to throw these GARBAGE, TRASH and RUBBISH OUT! They STINK and smell BAD!’</p>	<p>F.T.govt, May 29, 2011 at 12:08 pm: ‘The Papies FT policy is completely flawed. All Indians are conferred NRI status which means that they can get back Indian citizenship at any time even though they have adopted foreign citizenship or hold a foreign passport and have sworn allegiance to another country. So they can be singapore citizen tomorrow and revert back to Indian citizenship the following day.The Indian govt makes NRI policy into law to enable its citizens to go to other countries to work and Singapore Papies is assisting the migration of Indian citizens WHO CAN RETURN TO iNDIA AT OLD AGE AND ENJOY THE WEALTH THEY EXTRACTED FROM FOREIGN COUNTRIES DURING THEIR WORKING DAYS.. This policy is copied from Britain which has a PARTRAL law which states that all descendents of UK who have migrated are allowed to get back British citizen automatically if they can show thAt theie parents or grand -parents were British citizen. Singapore deprived a native citizen after 10 years if u dont return esp for polical purpose.A</p>	<p>Dealay Tactic, May 29, 2011 at 11:49 am: ‘I think PM Lee should address the FT problem first, ahead of any other problem. The employment, housing, healthcare and even ministerial pay issues have the FTs as a major factor for their existence. For example, FTs drive up the GDP artificially, increasing ministerial bonus but not benefitting the ordinary Singaporean. Maybe he hopes we will forget about the FTs as he distracts us with other matters, and quickly import 1.5M foreigners instead of the 900K which was mentioned by LKY, to hit the 6.5M target. The mass import of FT is *ECONOMIC GENOCIDE*, and must be solved first. If we read the earlier article in TR (on what directions SG should move in), we find that, from 2007-2010, while the population has increased 10.2%, per capita GDP has only grown 2.7%. Productivity has fallen for the last 10 years. Yes, FTs will keep the MNCs here, and our GDP will be maintained. But citizens have no work and will go hungry!!!’</p>

		bloody useless Papie govt. PAPIES WELCOME ALL FOREIGNERS TO MILK NATIVE SINGAPOREANS.VOTE PAPIES?????	Therefore population economics are totally useless. Actually, they are never mentioned in any economics textbook or are they practised by any other nation. So much for our 1st class govt.'
	I no longer know what I'm defending anymore, May 29, 2011 at 1:50 pm: 'IN the MRT, i never stand nor sit beside those Indians from India...they stink of foul body odour...same goes from the China people,...stink as hell...'	I no longer know what I'm defending anymore, May 29, 2011 at 1:49 pm: 'I'm indian and am a native singaporean and I say, 'PLease go back to Motherland India. We don't welcome you here. Get out!'"	
	Raymond Tan, May 29, 2011 at 4:12 pm: 'Hey all you Indians from India, if you are so smart as you say you are, then why not stay back in India and develop and fix you own country. I'hv lived in India for a few years in the late 90's and I know what kind of people you all are. You people are very filthy and very unhygienic. You bastards shit and urinate every where and any where you like. Most of your degrees are faked or bought by paying bribes. And most of you Bramins are the trouble makers for your country. If I had a choice I would kick everyone of the India Indians back to their motherland till kingdom comes. You can also take your Prataman with you when you leave singapore, he will be retiring soon. One of these days China will send their army to kick your Indian asses like they did in 1962.'		

	Belinda Goh, May 29, 2011 at 4:02 pm: The pungent smell of North India is pervading in Singapore		
<p><i>Jen, 'Love Singapore, Our Home?', The Online Citizen, 2 May 2012.</i></p> <p>At the time of writing, there were 50 responses to the article, which was within 4 days after the article was published.</p>	<p>LOL, 2 May 2012: 'Sick and tired of watching PRs pledging faux pride and allegiance to a foreign country while I have been applying unsuccessfully every year for NDP tickets. Off for holiday this time round. Couldn't care less about NDP.'</p>	<p>polishapple, 3 May 2012: 'I'd love to see how foolishly happy Singaporeans are to celebrate that day.. Remember it's not only birthday.. It's independence.. And this is what we got.. Maybe the 'love' for our country by the guards officer is meant for pr,new citizens and of course our beloved Thrash..'</p>	<p>Lions, 2 May 2012: 'yes indeed,SINGAPORE IS OUR COUNTRY,OUR HOME. BUT,sad to say,we have been mistreated in our own 'home' by our elite countrymen and some of us are even being mistreated by those foreign guests who now are 'stealing' our home and 'everything' we have worked so hard to out in our 'home'. what a shame that while exhorting singaporeans to be welcoming of migrant workers,we actually NEGLECT n MARGINLAISED our own people. tell us,can we still honestly call SG OUR HOME AND ALL TRUE BLUE SINGAPOREANS</p> <p>OUR 'FAMILY' when we keep breaking faith with them????'</p>
	<p>fair fare, 3 May 2012: 'i loathe to say this but i do not wish to see our country which we all,true lions,love,become filled with ft/pr/new citizenen whose only true love for this dearly beloved country we all help to build is only the MONEY they could harness for themselves at our expense. please,gahmen,wake up,you are going into the wrong direction. time will prove who are truly LOYAL N FAITHFUL to SINGAPORE,if not our own singaporeans,who</p>	<p>Homeless, 3 May 2012: 'Love Singapore, our Home. Our home? No more our country?'</p>	<p>Libran, 2 May 2012: 'Singaporeans may not realise it now, but the PAP govt. has sold our children's future away to foreigners. All the 'prosperity' we thought we had were bought by 1) selling a large chunk of Singapore to foreigners, 2) by enslaving our young with 30-year mortgage loans, and 3) by flooding the small country with millions of foreigners. In a small country where we have to jostle with foreigners for everthing from public housing to transportation to health care to education to jobs,</p>

	else?’		what pride can we feel? While our PAP politicians enrich themselves with millions while we slave for peanuts?’
	Duh 3 May 2012: ‘Singapore has already ceased to be a nation – it is now a resort island where every foreigner is welcomed and endorsed by our govt to come take a chunk of the Singapore pie so that they can retire in their homeland in comfort.’		

Note:

See (<http://www.temasekreview.com/2011/05/29/400000-expats-in-singapore-living-the-best-of-both-worlds/>)

At the time of writing, there were 257 responses to the article, which was within 2 days after the article was published.

Appendix 2 – Singapore Shared Values (National Library Board Singapore 2012)

1. Nation before community and society above self:

Putting the interests of society ahead of the individual.

2. Family as the basic unit of society:

The family is identified as the most stable fundamental building block of the nation.

3. Community support and respect for the individual:

Recognizes that the individual has rights, which should be respected and not light [sic] encroached upon. Encourages the community to support and have compassion for the disadvantaged individual who may have been left behind by the free market system.

4. Consensus, not conflict:

Resolving issues through consensus and not conflict stresses the importance of compromise and national unity.

5. Racial and religious harmony:

Recognizes the need for different communities to live harmoniously with one another in order for all to prosper.

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Notes

Introduction

¹ I use the term 'ethnicity' rather than 'race' in this book because Singapore tends to group different ethnic groups into big racial categories. However, in recent years, there has been some subtle amendments to big racial groupings with ancestral origins of Malays (for example, Bugis) documented in their identity cards.

² Any public critical discussion of race and ethnicity are considered not only racist but criminal under the Sedition Act (Cap. 290, 1985 Rev. Ed.).

³ Selvaraj Velayutham (2007) provides a good background and analysis of Singapore's march towards globalisation.

⁴ I examine these ethnic classifications in more depth in Chapter 2.

⁵ Chua's paper provides a good explanation of multiculturalism as practiced in Singapore in terms of the politics and hierarchy of ethnicity where the Chinese are predominant in these areas over others, particularly the Malays. His paper has a useful list of work on multiculturalism in Singapore by local academics.

⁶ Despite the PAP still retaining power in the General Elections, they lost almost 40% of the popular vote and 6 out of 87 parliamentary seats while their candidate for the Presidential elections — Tony Tan — only won by less than 1% of the final vote (Lim 2011).

⁷ The environment that cinema provides, in terms of the opportunity to read films according to the lens audiences are armed with or prepared to use, is a far cry from less nuanced live action theatre or performance-based art forms which can be more confronting. An excellent example of such a performance is the one given by Vincent Leow in 1992. Leow's performance received notoriety primarily because his act involved drinking his own urine. His performance received wide publicity in the local papers, not for the themes or metaphorical messages that were soon lost, but for the consumption of his urine. The general public were frank about their distaste of the performance and raised the issue of public decency in the arts space. Leow's practice, as the curator of his work Lindy Poh (2007) explains 'has maintained the element of anarchy and rebellion so critical to alternative practices'. Unfortunately local audiences at the time were not really ready for confronting themes of anarchy and rebellion in theatre. Singaporean audiences, however, are not resistant to such themes presented in the moving picture. A very good example of this are the films of Eric Khoo which often display images and narratives of the dark underbelly of Singapore such as necrophilia are openly presented. Both local art house and general audiences appreciate and applaud Khoo's use of dark matter in his films.

⁸ A Google search of the phrases 'Singapore blogs' and 'Singapore online forums' produced 54 million and 223 million hits respectively. This book specifically refers to some of the more popular online sites.

Chapter 1

¹ The high production value of commercial local films, however, is not comparable to Hollywood productions. These more modest productions are financially supported by the Singapore government under its various schemes to build up the city state as a media hub, as well as through transnational studios such as Raintree Pictures, which is a partnership between Singapore's state-owned broadcaster MediaCorp and Hong Kong financiers.

² Film of course allows for an understanding of societies closed off to the rest of the world, such as China during the height of communist rule. China through the lens has been fodder for international audiences and scholars alike (Cui 2003, Berry & Farquhar 2006) who have been captivated and enamoured by the local filmic presentations of China which they feel provides the international community an understanding of this significant nation.

³ A collection edited by David C. L. Lim and Hiroyuki Yamamoto (2011), dedicated to examining cinema as providing a form of cultural interpretation and social intervention, contains several chapters outlining the success Singapore films have achieved in this regard.

⁴ Reading international film reviews of Singapore films reveals that international audiences sometimes struggle to understand local Singaporean cultural nuances such as language (Singapore English or Singlish). However, like local audiences, they too are attracted by the uniqueness of Singapore cinema's ability to capture local society and culture. Although Singapore films look experimental and lack the sophisticated film and narrative techniques of popular Hollywood films, these very nuances prove successful in the international art-house market.

⁵ The use of the term 'The Everyman' is by no means meant to be misogynistic. With the exception of a few films such as *The Maid* (Tong 2005) and *881* (R. Tan 2007), most Singapore made films feature male protagonists.

⁶ Historically, the state of Kedah had contact with Imperial China through such famous events as the visit by Admiral Cheng Ho in the early 15th century. The sultan of Kedah at the time presented Cheng Ho with one of his daughters as a wife to the famous mariner. Evidence of Chinese and Malay contact in Kedah is evidenced

in the Kedah State Museum, which possesses early Chinese porcelain from archaeological excavations in the Bujang Valley (The Ministry of Tourism, Malaysia 2011).

⁷ The Everyman is a popular figure even amongst Singaporean audiences in contemporary locally made films featuring Chinese languages.

⁸ Raintree Pictures is the most prominent, prolific and successful production studio in Singapore. It has produced a number of Jack Neo films such as *I Not Stupid* and *Homerun*. Raintree has also collaborated with other Hong Kong film companies to produce *The Truth About Jane and Sam* (Yee 1999), *The Eye* (Pang & Pang 2002), *The Eye 2* (Pang & Pang 2004) and *Infernal Affairs II* (Lau & Mak 2003). *Rice Rhapsody* starring Taiwanese Sylvia Chang, Americans Martin Yan and Maggie Q, and French Mélanie Laurent, was produced by Jackie Chan with Hong Kong film-maker Kenneth Bi. *Forever Fever* – also known as *That's the Way I Like It* – may be set in 1970s *Saturday Night Fever* obsessed Singapore, but the content (language, narrative and characters) are principally Singapore-centric.

⁹ At a conference I attended in Pennsylvania on American literature and film, both the literary text and the film adaptation of *Grapes of Wrath* were still being discussed as necessary texts for the study of American culture (Lev 2005).

¹⁰ Singapore, like Hong Kong, is host to a large diasporic ethnic Chinese population.

¹¹ The Singaporean Shared Values – a set of values which the government developed around the time of the Asian values debate circa 1991 – is also based on selected Chinese Confucian teachings (Gomes 2009).

¹² For examples, see forums in online sites such as the news site *AsiaOne* (Singapore Press Holdings 2012) and popular political sites *The Online Citizen* (2012.), *Sam's Alfresco Haven: Celebrating Singapore's Golden Period!* (Leong 2012) and *TR Emeritus* (n.d.).

¹³ These identification cards are known as National Registration Identity Card or NRIC.

¹⁴ Singaporean-Chinese who are not atheist, Christian or Muslim tend to combine Buddhism and Taoism together as a unified faith.

¹⁵ Catholicism, for example, was spread by Spanish and Portuguese colonists in South East Asia particularly the Philippines and Malacca. Other incarnations of Christianity such as Methodism and Protestantism found their way to the colonies particularly through European conquerors in different parts of South East Asia. Being a transnational and transitional place of trade, the British crown colony of Singapore became a valuable place for proselytizing by Christian missionaries who set up churches for the newly baptized and educational institutions known as 'mission schools' catering at first for orphaned or abandoned children. In Singapore, Christianity grew by leaps and bounds with more new converts today particularly amongst the Chinese. Today, mission schools have become exclusive, often catering to the English-educated and middle class rather than the poor and orphaned.

¹⁶ It is not far-fetched to say that Christianity is openly practised and performed in Singapore. When I worked for the government service, a number of my colleagues were practising Christians who brought their religion into the workplace. A small unit in the government department I worked in, for example, made Christianity part of their daily discourse by peppering their conversations with biblical references, playing Christian music on the radio at all times and displaying posters in the room dedicated to Jesus Christ and passages from the bible. Today, this display of Christianity has been taken to new heights of performance with the advent of social networking sites; Sites such as Facebook have numerous groups with strong memberships allowing users to display their allegiance to the faith through status updates, with forums dedicated to different facets, issues and denominations of Christianity in Singapore. Typing in the words 'Singapore' and 'Catholics' revealed 21 groups while 'Singapore' and 'Christians' displayed 86 groups.

¹⁷ Whenever I talk to Singaporeans, whether they may be family members, friends, acquaintances or even students I teach, the love-hate relationship they have with the PAP government is often expressed when discussing Singapore.

¹⁸ The Facebook page for *TR Emeritus* still goes by the name 'The Temasek Review' (<https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Temasek-Review/190806675782>).

¹⁹ Many locals have long regarded the ISA not as a means for national security but as a tool used by the PAP to silent troublesome critics of the PAP government.

Chapter 2

¹ The comedy genre provides a platform to present a society's anxieties through parody. State cinemas have long represented ethnicities and nationalities they have difficulties with through playful, humorous and sometimes absurd depictions. Hong Kong comedies for instance portrayed Caucasians as buffoons, idiots and villains in the 1980s and 1990s when the colony was collectively anxious and nursing feelings of betrayal when the British were preparing for the 1997 handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China. There is a similar phenomenon in television. The British for instance dealt with the trauma of World War II by creating the long-running comedy *'Allo 'Allo* which was set in German-occupied France.

² Since the 1980s however, Singapore's ethnic landscape has been changing with the rising tide of both unskilled and skilled workers from neighbouring Asian countries and beyond who address the nation's incredible need for manual labour and professional expertise. Singaporeans have been struggling to come to terms with the increasing tide of different ethnicities and new migrants from China, India, and the Philippines in particular living and working both temporarily and permanently in Singapore. I discuss the issues connected to the presence of foreigners in Singapore in different parts of this book.

³ Visitors to Singapore come in droves from all round the world partly because Singapore is a safe spot to indulge in everything the imagined exotic Asia has to offer while still enjoying Western standards of comfort and amenities. Singapore Zoo, for instance, is world renowned for having the cleanest toilets amongst tourists, who can experience the sounds of a rainforest, with the amenities are fitted out with waterfalls.

⁴ The Ministry of Education website (http://vs.moe.edu.sg/national_symbol.htm) explains the Singapore Shared Values as a set of values that 'incorporates the various aspects of our cultural heritage, namely the attitudes and values which have helped us survive as a nation. In essence, it was to be a blueprint for the development of a national ideology that Singaporeans of all races and faiths could subscribe to and live by'. The Singapore Shared Values basically emphasizes hard work, hierarchy, and religious and ethnic tolerance. See Appendix 2 for the Singapore Shared Values.

⁵ *PCK Pte Ltd*'s appeal through cultural cringe is similar to the appeal popular Australian sitcom *Kath & Kim* (2002-08) enjoys. *Kath & Kim* follows the exploits of lovable mother and daughter bogans Kath and Kim. Bogan is a term that refers to Australians of lower-class backgrounds and whose behaviour reflects this (Campbell 2004).

⁶ I am Eurasian, having grown up and lived in Singapore as a young adult. Often, though, I was confronted by both work colleagues and people on the street wanting to know what ethnicity I belonged to, since my appearance did not neatly fall into any of the CMI categories. The temptation to reply 'human' whenever someone asked 'What are you?' was at times overwhelming.

⁷ Singaporean Eurasians even helped form an official collective in 1989 called Australian Eurasian Association of WA Inc. (2011) 'with the objective of promoting social activities and goodwill among migrants from mixed Asian and European ancestry, many of whom originated from Singapore and Malaysia'.

⁸ Eurasians, particularly those who were light skinned and spoke English well, thrived under the British. Often associating themselves with the white colonizer, these Eurasians saw Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP as a threat to their lifestyle and their culture, since they felt that in independence the postcolonial government favoured the Chinese above all other communal groups.

⁹ Marghese also played Kenny Pereira in the original 1987 play.

¹⁰ The use of sexuality as a platform for discussing issues that confront society is not new. Hong Kong cinema's martial arts cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, for instance, often featured a transgender figure, which has been often theorized as a site for discussion of the angst and trauma Hong Kong people experienced prior to the 1997 handover of the then British colony to mainland China. The late 1980s and the 1990s saw a barrage of swordplay films produced, such as *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain*, *A Chinese Ghost Story*, *New Dragon Gate Inn* and *Ashes of Time*. Film-maker Tsui Hark became popularly associated with this revival. The 1980s/90s swordplay films were different from their 1960s predecessors. These films attempted to reflect the fears and anxieties of the 1997 British handover to mainland China through the use of technology in order to create fantastical effects, confusing and far-fetched narratives and transgendered characters (Bordwell 2000).

¹ When I was living in Singapore, *Growing Up* was screened at prime time on Sunday nights. Each episode generated much discussion within my own family and amongst my friends and my colleagues every week. *The Little Nyonya* was screened while I was teaching in Australia and the serial received very positive reviews from my Singapore-born students who downloaded episodes from YouTube.

² Singapore films have equally tragic narratives with lead characters or their loved ones succumbing to cancer. In Royston Tan's *881* (2007) for instance, protagonist Little Papaya (Mindee Ong) dies of cancer at the age of 25.

³ Not so much nostalgic but the retelling of a traumatic event in Singapore's history, the film *Medium Rare* (Smith 1992), that kick-started the renaissance of Singapore cinema, was based on the 1979 true crimes of executed serial killer Adrian Lim.

⁴ The ruling party has often told Singaporeans, particularly during election time, that the PAP provides stability that attracts foreign investment.

⁵ Tan's cinema's dedication to memory is acknowledged by Ben Slater (2012) whose review of her films *Singapore GaGa* and *Invisible City* is captured in his aptly titled essay 'Stealing Moments: A History of the Forgotten in Recent Singaporean Film'. In this essay Slater provides a narrative of the people featured in her work as providing a glimpse of Singapore outside official discourse.

⁶ Memory, according to de Certeau ‘derives its interventionary force from its very capacity to be altered – unmoored, mobile, lacking any fixed position. Its permanent mark is that it is formed (and forms its ‘capital’) by *arising from the other* (a circumstance) and by *losing it* (it is no more than a memory). ... Far from being the reliquary or trash can of the past, it sustains itself by *believing* in the existence of possibilities and by vigilantly awaiting them, constantly on the watch for their appearance’ (de Certeau 1988: 86-87).

⁷ The Speak Mandarin Campaign is still ongoing. For an official history of the campaign, see its website <http://www.mandarin.org.sg>.

⁸ In their work on racial and gender hierarchies in Singapore, Geraldine Heng and Janadas Devan (1995: 203) explain that the version of Chineseness the state chose is comprised of ‘the retrieval of a superior, “core” Chinese culture in the name of a fantasmatic “Confucianism”; the promotion of Mandarin, the preferred dialect of the ruling class of imperial China, as the master language of Chineseness, and the concoction of a “national ideology,” grounded in a selective refiguration of Confucianism, to promote the interests of the state’.

⁹ There is a Taoist festival known as Qingming that takes place on the fifteenth day of the spring equinox, dedicated to ancestor worship. This festival, also known as Tomb Sweeping Day, sees Taoists visit their ancestors’ resting places as a mark of respect and also to clean the gravesites. There is also the Hungry Ghost Festival, which is a month long, held around August-September. Taoists believe that during the Hungry Ghost Festival the gates of hell are flung open and the ghosts run around amongst the living. In order to placate the dead, entertainment is held specifically for them in the form of Cantonese opera and *getai* shows. *Getai* shows are immensely popular and significant in Singapore, as seen by the large crowds gathered at make-shift stages. Usually Cantonese opera and *getai* singers share the stage together. The significance of *getai* performers in particular can be seen in the media with the very popular Royston Tan film *881* – a tragic comedy about two *getai* singers – and the daily feature on *getai* performers in the citizen journalism website STOMP! (Singapore Press Holdings 2011).

¹⁰ Columbariums in Singapore have attracted international attention. In May 2011 the German television programme *Galileo* featured Singapore’s columbariums, however from a comedic perspective (Ravikrishnan 2011).

Chapter 4

¹ *Mee Pok Man* is a tragic tale of two people: the mildly mentally retarded *mee pok* seller (Joe Ng) and prostitute Bunny (Michelle Goh). The *mee pok* (*Mee pok* is a noodle soup dish served with minced meat) man is quietly in love with Bunny, who in turn is having a relationship with sleazy and unfaithful British pornographer Jonathan Reese (David Brazil), whom she thinks will rescue her from her sad life in Singapore by taking her to England with him. Tragedy strikes when Bunny is left for dead in a hit-and-run accident. Discovering the injured Bunny, the *mee pok* man takes her to his flat and attempts to nurse her back to health. Slowly, Bunny and the *mee pok* man get to know each other, with Bunny learning to appreciate his kindness. She may even be falling in love with him, even though he fails to get proper medical help for her. Bunny and the *mee pok* man then make love, which tragically ends with Bunny dying just when they are about to reach a sexual climax. The *mee pok* man refuses to part with Bunny, instead carrying on a relationship with her corpse. While the depiction of necrophilia is obviously disturbing and depressing to watch, the *mee pok* man’s tenderness towards Bunny’s corpse is incredibly moving and sad.

² The Singapore government does have a hand in funding both independent and commercial films through various organisations. The Singapore Film Commission, which is a government organisation, helps the local film industry not only through funding but by assisting to promote Singapore as both a media and a film-making hub. The Singapore government is also involved in funding bigger budget films that are produced by established studios. MediaCorp, the government-funded television and radio broadcaster, is a partner in Raintree Pictures, which is a transnational production company with links to the Hong Kong film industry. In Singapore independent films are financed through independent film studios such as Objectifs Films and Zhao Wei Films, grants from the Singapore Film Commission, research institutions such as the Institute of Policy Studies and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, and by private benefactors.

³ While some of Martyn See’s films have been banned or heavily censored, implying strongly that the government considers his productions harmful to Singapore and the need to protect Singaporean audiences, he argues that dissent should not be equated as being disloyal to Singapore (Mohan 2012).

⁴ I use the masculine here intentionally since a lot of Singapore films overwhelmingly feature strong male protagonist and ensemble characters.

⁵ Likewise in Khoo’s *Be With Me*. In this film, themes of young lesbian love and sexual obsession end tragically.

⁶ While Singapore-made films do portray sexuality, it is often done in order to create a comedic effect rather than as a point of serious contemplation or discussion. Films such as *Army Daze* (Ong 1996) which features the effeminate Kenny Pereira, *Liang Po Po: The Movie* (Teng 1999) featuring Jack Neo in drag and to a

certain extent the gay and transgendered characters in the daring yet poignant *Bugis Street* (Yonfan 1995) rely on the over-effeminized portrayal of homosexual characters in order to entertain audiences.

⁷ Singaporeans accuse the mainland Chinese collectively, privately and publicly, of not being able to assimilate into Singaporean society and culture through their lack of English language skills and social ineptness. In 2011 a Facebook campaign to ‘Cook and Share a Pot of Curry’ on 21 August was launched in protest against mainland Chinese – and to a greater extent, recent temporary and permanent residents – for their inability to accept Singaporean multiculturalism and live harmoniously amongst people of various ethnicities in Singapore. The campaign, which attracted tens of thousands of Singaporeans both in Singapore and overseas and asked them to commit to cooking curry, came about because of a mainland Chinese family’s complaint over the smell of curry being cooked by their Indian neighbours in the block of flats they all resided in.

⁸ For a humorous list of ‘True Singaporean cultural nuances, see the post by Kway Png (2003) in the satirical Singaporean website Talkingcock.Com (www.talkingcock.com).

Chapter 5

¹ *The Maid*’s critical overseas reception, however, can best be described as lukewarm. It was panned by cross-cultural online critics for its lack of originality within the Asian horror genre. For examples see AnthroFred (2008) and Young (2006).

² For a concise description of the Hungry Ghost Festival, see T.S Lee (2000).

³ Esther’s death and the attempt to kill Rosa seem very poignant, given the number of FDW deaths in the news the past few years.

⁴ At the time of editing this manuscript, *Maidlibrary* requires a login name and password while the *Bad Maid Database* URL has become defunct.

Chapter 6

¹ This is purely because of demographics. Singapore residents are 74.1 per cent ethnic Chinese who are more comfortable speaking in the Chinese dialects of Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese (Department of Statistics, Singapore, 2011).

² Singapore films are generally not solely in (Singapore) English or Chinese. Instead, most Singapore films are (Singapore) English-Chinese language productions with language classifications dependent sometimes on the dominant tongue. With that said, Chinese films are never in a specific language (Mandarin) or dialect (Hokkien, Teochew and/or Cantonese) but rather a mixture of (Singapore) English, Mandarin and the Chinese dialects. It is also necessary to note that Singaporeans appreciate Chinese language films heavily peppered with Hokkien, Teochew and Cantonese since they are commonly spoken amongst ethnic Singaporean-Chinese. For the purpose of this book however, I am concentrating on Singlish since a discussion of the other dialects in a single chapter would not do justice to the rich cultural nuances that vernacular brings.

³ Good spoken English is also the pride of Singaporeans who are ethnically Eurasian and who are educated in Christian mission schools well known for producing students with an extremely high proficiency of spoken and written English.

⁴ Singaporean-Chinese Chinese dialects indicate the ancestral regions and provinces Singaporean-Chinese are able to trace their lineage to. Han Chinese originally come from Southern China. Teochew-speaking people are Chaozhou or Teochew people who originally come from the Chaozhou region of Guangdong. The Cantonese-speaking people come from Canton (Guangzhou). The Hokkiens, whom many Singaporean-Chinese consider themselves to be, are able to trace their ancestral lineage to the Southern Fujian province.

⁵ It is also necessary to acknowledge that some Singaporeans who are of non-Chinese ethnic backgrounds become frustrated with more extreme usages of Singlish. This is perhaps due to the strong connections between ethnic Chinese and Singlish. Anecdotally, non-Singaporean-Chinese have somewhat felt left out in Singapore because they are not part of the Singaporean-Chinese majority.

⁶ The lyrics for ‘Why you so like dat?’ are:

I give you all my chocolate,
I give you my tic tac,
But when I wan a kit kat,
You never gimme back!

Oui, why u so like dat ah?
Hey why u so like dat?
Why u so like dat ah?
Hey why u so like dat?

I let you kopy all my sum,

Because you always blur,
But when I try to kopy back,
You always call the Sir!

Oui, why u so like dat ah?
Hey why u so like dat?
Why u so like dat ah?
Hey why u so like dat?

You tell me dat you don't like girl,
I also donno why,
But when you see a pretty girl,
Your voice go up damn high!

Oui, why u so like dat ah?
Hey why u so like dat?
Why u so like dat ah?
Hey why u so like dat!

⁷ Kumar's performances, for instance, are best described as risqué due not only to the sexual content of his jokes but also to the taboo twin topics of government and race which he successfully satires. While Kumar's performances are raunchy and provocative, this has not stopped his transgendered performing self from becoming the accepted and comfortable face of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community in Singapore. Kumar has been featured performing in national events such as the National Day Parade and the LGBT-friendly Nation Party. Phua Chu Kang, on the other hand, is considered more family friendly as his act (persona and jokes) pertain to the idiosyncrasies of everyday Singaporeans. The local popularity of Phua Chu Kang has prompted the government to allow Singh to promote his alter ego to overseas audiences. In 2002, Phua Chu Kang was featured prominently on the globally distributed popular Hollywood television reality show *The Amazing Race* when Singapore was one of the destinations. Singh has also been part of the local entertainment troupe during the yearly Singapore Day events which are held in cities that support a sizable Singaporean diaspora such as New York, Melbourne and Shanghai.

⁸ With the exception of *I Not Stupid*, all other films are considered mostly English language productions. *I Not Stupid* is predominantly in Mandarin with Chinese dialects and Singlish.

⁹ Visiting Singapore every year particularly throughout my doctoral study, it always amazed me how the landscape changed within a year. This included both the city shopping district in Orchard Road and residential areas (landed and high rise property neighbourhoods).

¹⁰ Of course there are many other reasons why Singaporeans are attracted to opposition candidates during the lead up to the general elections. The primary reason is because they are not the PAP. While the opposition has usually been somewhat fractured and disorganized, they have been increasingly becoming a viable force due to their recruitment of professional and university-educated candidates. They also have been voicing the bread-and-butter issues Singaporeans are concerned about. Opposition rallies are usually packed, primarily because this is one of the rare occasions when Singaporeans are able to express their collective resistance to the government. With that said, however, the most number of opposition candidates Singaporeans have ever voted in has been six out of 87.

¹¹ When I was a young girl, I accompanied my father to one of Low's election rallies in the year he first contested the seat of Hougang. My father – who was half-Teochew on his mother's side and could speak the dialect relatively well – was incredibly impressed at Low's use of language. My father was not the only one that day impressed with Low. The crowds at that rally were whipped into a frenzy when Low spoke to them.

¹² For instance, by flying the Singapore flag for a month as part of the National Day celebrations and by joining various Facebook groups that support Singapore nationalism.

¹³ When I used to work for the Singapore civil service, there were mentoring sessions organised for select graduate staff with management. At departmental level these sessions were chaired by the head and deputy head while at ministry level, the permanent secretary or deputy permanent secretary who are the top civil servants in any ministry, were the chairs.

¹⁴ The matchmaking agency, known initially as the Social Development Unit (SDU) and currently as the Social Development Network (SDN), helps single Singaporeans meet with the hope of marriage. I discuss Singapore's national movement for procreation as well as the SDU and SDN in more detail in Chapter 6.

¹⁵ Foreign talent migrants enter Singapore on a work visa, as opposed to a work permit, which is reserved for temporary blue-collar unskilled workers such as foreign domestic workers and labourers. As of September 2012, minimum eligibility for a work visa includes a minimum fixed salary of SGD\$3000 a month and

recognized tertiary education. There is also hierarchy of categories – P1, P2 and Q1 – designated further by income levels. The eligibility income levels are as follows: more than \$9000 for P1, more than \$4500 for P2 and more than \$3000 for Q1. Most often, these temporary migrants are able to attain permanent residence without much difficulty and are able to change employers without repatriation (Ministry of Manpower 2013).

¹⁶ This election saw the PAP lose six out of 87 parliamentary seats, with a general movement on social media to vote for the opposition, and is considered the poorest showing of the PAP since self-government in 1959.

¹⁷ It is not only language that the local media has highlighted as a way for migrants to blend into Singapore society and culture: living in HDB flats, eating at hawker centres and mixing with locals have been identified as generally blending into the local cultural landscape. In the 2000s, *The Straits Times*, for instance, featured Caucasians working in Singapore who had opted to live with Singaporeans in heartlander neighbourhoods rather than in gated expatriate communities.

Conclusion

¹⁸ Responding to his admission, netizens trawled the Internet for dirt on him. This proved to be a simple task since Gay, a teacher in a junior college (high school), often commented on public forums which seemingly either took a pro-PAP or anti-Muslim stance. At the time of writing, netizens have written to the Ministry of Education to look into the matter, asking for his resignation, as they feel that Gay is not fit to be a teacher due to his anti-Muslim comments that contravene Singaporean multicultural policies.